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DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

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Putting Chopin and the Rez Together: Multicultural Features in Tomson Highway's Work

Multikulturní rysy v díle Tomsona Highwaye

2012 Klára Kolinská, PhD.

I would like to express my gratitude to the supervisor of this thesis Klára Kolinská, PhD. for introducing me to Canadian studies and to the personality of Tomson Highway and for supervising my work with patience and kindness; I owe special thanks to my family and friends for unrelenting support of my studies (of various kinds).

I declare that the following MA thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned, and that this thesis has not been used in the course of other university studies or in order to acquire the same or another type of diploma.

In Prague Bc. Jana Marešová

Welcome to the cabaret!

Tomson Highway

Abstrakt

Tato diplomová práce nazvaná *Multikulturní rysy v díle Tomsona Highwaye* se zaměřuje na dílo domorodého kanadského spisovatele a hudebníka Tomsona Highwaye. Práce rozebírá ty prvky jeho díla, které vyjadřují myšlenky multikulturalismu a hybridity. Zabývá se podobou postav v jeho díle a zobrazením hlavní postavy mytologie původních obyvatel Kanady, postavy šibala. Způsob, jakým Highway spojuje své vzdělání postavené na evropsko-kanadských základech a svou citovou vnímavost pramenící z kultury jeho lidu, ukazuje analýza dramatických prostředků a hudby v jeho díle. Highway svým dílem podporuje a prosazuje představy multikulturalismu. On sám díky němu totiž našel svou osobní i uměleckou volnost.

Abstract

The thesis titled *Putting Chopin and the Rez Together: Multicultural Features in Tomson Highway's Work* focuses on the work of renowned Native Canadian playwright, novelist, and musician Tomson Highway. The paper analyses those features of his writing and music that express the idea of multiculturalism and hybridity. It discusses the nature of the characters in his work and the image of the central character of Native mythology, the trickster. The analysis of dramatic techniques and music shows the way Highway combines his Euro-Canadian education and Native sensibility. Highway supports and promotes the notion of multiculturalism by his work. It has helped him to find personal as well as creative independence.

Key words

Tomson Highway Native Canadian literature trickster multiculturalism hybridity cabaret

Contents

1 Introduction

This diploma thesis is focused on the work of the renowned Canadian playwright, novelist, and composer Tomson Highway. The paper analyses those features of his writing and music that express the idea of multiculturalism and hybridity. Highway has lived in various cultural contexts and he has managed to transform their discrepancy into creative and productive power. The intention of this paper lies in showing the literary and musical devices by which he promotes heterogeneity and by which he argues it to be the new artistic voice of himself and his generation.

In deference to Tomson Highway's relative obscurity in this country, there is a short biographical chapter and overview of the works discussed preceding the proper analysis. That section concentrates on illustrating Highway's diverse cultural experience and on the development of his artistic voice. The following chapters examine the ideas of hybridity and cultural clash in terms of work with human and divine characters and design of dramatic techniques. The last chapter is dedicated to the author's music production, because music is a significant part of his artistic life and it is also reflected in all his literary work.

Tomson Highway searched for his expressive voice for a long time. He had to sort out the cultural differences he came across and he had to overcome their contradictions. His search for the right path and the frequent and inevitable collisions are explored in his work as well. This paper shows the way he uses these themes to support the hybridity on which he founded not only his personal but also creative style.

The ideas expressed in this thesis are based on Highway's dramas, musical shows, songs, lectures and on his novel. Close reads of his published material has fortunately been supplemented by personal attendance of one of the artist's cabarets[1] and two of his lectures[2] in Prague and by travelling to see one of the performances of Highway's play *The Rez Sisters*[3] in Toronto. The secondary materials discussed were collected mainly during a study stay in Robarts Library in Toronto undertaken at private expense.

[1] Tomson Highway, *Kisageetin – Kabaret*, Divadlo Kampa, Praha, 28 Apr 2011.

[2] The first lecture titled *On Native Mythology* was attended during the 31st American Indian Workshop held in Prague on 25-28 March, 2011. The lecture took place on 25 March. The second lecture was titled *Večer s Tomsonem Highwayem: O indiánské literatuře v Québecu s klavírním doprovodem autora* and was presented by French Institute in Prague on 28 March 2011.

[3] This performance was at the Factory Theatre in Toronto on 11 Nov 2011.

2 Tomson Highway and his work

2.1 Biography

Tomson Highway was born on 6 December 1951 in northern Manitoba (for his portrait picture from the 1980s see appendix 1, p. 65). His father was a Cree hunter, fisherman and famous dog-sled racer and he was the 11th child born to his mother in a tent on a snow bank of Maria Lake (See map in appendix 2, p. 66). He spent the first six years of his life running a trap line with his family and he describes this period as "paradise." [1] The beauty of the sub-arctic landscape full of lakes, forests and caribou stayed imprinted in his mind despite the fact that his future life digressed from this image significantly. [2]

At the age of six he was taken to Guy Hill Indian Residential School in The Pas, Manitoba, which he attended until the age of 15. There he learned English (his mother tongue was the Native Canadian language Cree) and started to play piano. He later attended Churchill High School in Winnipeg and then the University of Manitoba, Faculty of Music where he studied piano. He left to spend a year in London taking lessons with a concert pianist; afterwards resuming his studies at the University of Western Ontario. He graduated and earned bachelor degrees both in music (1975) and arts (1976).[3]

His studies were not, however, followed by a career corresponding to them. After university, Highway worked for seven years as a social worker and organiser of cultural and educational programs with various Native Canadian organisations. Being occupied with problems of contemporary Native society and being in close contact with Native people enabled him to discover their lives' sorrows and joys and better understand the relationship between Native and mainstream society. [4]

Equipped with his education and experience, he began writing. He was thirty and the first years of his career as a playwright were very difficult. There was no funding for his plays and Native American drama was by completely marginalised in the Canadian theatre

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[1] In the CBC Television interview with Duncan McKeough titled "The Story Teller," *The National Magazine* (Totonto: Southam Inc.), 24 June 1999.

[2] From the introduction in Tomson Highway, *The Rez Sisters* (Toronto: Fifth House Publishers, 1988), vi-ix and in William H. New, *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 487.

[3] From the introduction in Tomson Highway, *The Rez Sisters*, vii.

[4] From the website Aboriginal Iniciatives, "Tomson Highway," *Lakehead University*, 4 June 2010, 15 July 2012, <http://aboriginalinitiatives.lakeheadu.ca/solution/aboriginalprofiles.php?bioid=61>.

world.[5] A success finally came in 1986 with the production of *The Rez Sisters*. The play won the Dora Mavor Moore Award for The Best New Play and it helped him gain wider recognition. His subsequent play, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* was equally acclaimed.

Highway worked as an artistic director of Native Earth Performing Arts theatre from 1986 to 1992. This organisation immensely contributed to the development of Native theatre and arts in Canada.[6] He also collaborated with his brother René, a professional dancer, who created choreography for the plays. The performances combined theatre, dance and music and later on they gave rise to Tomson's discovery of cabarets and musical shows as his new expressive genres. Two examples of this phase of his work are the plays *The Incredible Adventures of Mary Jane Mosquito* or *Rose*. In 1998 he began working in yet another field, this time a novel titled *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. After the turn of the millennium he published three bilingual (Cree-English) children's books - *Caribou Song*, *Dragonfly Kites* and *Fox on the Ice*. He is currently working on his second novel. [7]

Beside his literary and musical activities he teaches and lectures at universities and other institutions in Canada and abroad. He has travelled, given talks, and performed his shows all over the world, including Prague. He has received many awards for his artistic contribution to Canadian culture and holds eight honorary doctorates.[8]

2.2 Overview of works discussed

The Rez Sisters[9] (1988)

Set on the fictional reserve of Wasaychigan Hill in Ontario, the play presents seven Native women (Pelajia Patchnose, Philomena Moosetail, Marie-Adele Starblanket, Annie Cook, Emily Dictionary, Veronique St. Pierre and Zhaboonigan Peterson) and male trickster.

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[5] Highway describes his troubles with the production of his plays in the essay titled "Should Only Native Actors Have the Right to Play Native Roles?" published in *Prairie Fire*, Vol. 22, No. 3, 2001.

[6] Jennifer Preston writes about the group and Highway's significance for it in her paper titled "Weesageechak Begins to Dance: Native Earth Performing Art Inc." In *The Drama Review*, Vol. 36, No. 1, Spring 1992.

[7] From William H. New, *Encyclopedia*, 487-488.

[8] To list but a few, Highway won the Dora Mavor Moore Award three times,received the Order of Canada in 1994, and the National Aboriginal Achievement Award in 2001. Based on information in "Biography," *Tomson Highway* 15 July 2012 <http://www.tomsonhighway.com/biography.html>.

[9] Tomson Highway, *The Rez Sisters* (Toronto: Fifth House Publishers, 1988). All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

It is late summer 1986 and the women long for a trip to Toronto where a big bingo game takes place. They do not have enough money, however, and so they start various crazy activities to fund the trip.

On the way to the city, the women talk and disclose their secrets and the most intimate stories of their life (the suicide of Emily's lesbian lover Rose, Philomena's lost child, Marie-Adele's cancer, for example). The trickster, who has been mostly watching and dancing until this moment, plays the bingo master at the bingo and the audience plays along. Except for Philomena (she buys a new toilet with the money she wins), the women do not win anything there. They lose one of their sisters; Marie-Adele dies during the bingo. The play closes by the same scene it started - Pelajia nailing shingles to the roof of her house and the trickster dances to the rhythm of the hammer.

See two pictures of various performances of *The Rez Sisters* in appendix 3, p. 67.

Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing[10] (1989)

This plays features seven men (Zachary Jeremiah Keechigeesik, Big Joey, Pierre St. Pierre, Creature Nataways, Dickie Bird, Spooky Lacroix and Simon Starblanket), living in the same reservation as the women in *The Rez Sisters*, and female trickster appearing in forms of various women. Pierre St. Pierre brings the news the women plan to form their own ice-hockey team.

During the preparations for the game Dickie Bird is introduced, a boy suffering from foetal alcohol syndrome, confused by the world he happens to be in. Spooky Lacroix speaks to him about Jesus and his love. Simon Starblanket, on the other hand, teaches him to chant and dance in the traditional way. Caught in a cultural dilemma, he rapes the pregnant trickster/Patsy Pegahmagahbow by a crucifix. Big Joey, his biological father watches the scene but does not intervene. The story of Dickie's birth is disclosed. Dickie's mother gave birth in a pub, very drunk, without any help. Big Joey saw her there but let her down.

When Simon learns about the rape (Patsy is his girlfriend and wife-to-be), he takes his gun and searches for Dickie in rage. His gun goes off accidentally and he dies. The play is, however, closed by an optimistic image of Zachary, his wife and their new-born child.

[10] Tomson Highway, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (Saskatoon Saskatchewan: Fifth House Publishers, 1989). All subsequent quotations are from this edition. An abbreviation of the title (*Dry Lips*) is used in the paper from now on.

Kiss of the Fur Queen[11] (1998)

The novel tells a story of Jeremiah and Gabriel Okimasis. Their father is a hunter in northern Manitoba and he wins a dog-sled race for which he is kissed by the Fur Queen. The boys are taken to a residential school soon where they learn English and Jeremiah starts to play piano. They are both victims of sexual abuse performed by one of the priests which leaves them with great emotional disturbance and aversion to Christianity.

Knowing they cannot stay with their parents because of the experience of the residential school, they move to Winnipeg to study. Jeremiah studies piano and Gabriel falls in love with dancing. They are both successful in their art studies but they cease to understand each other. Gabriel's promiscuity and homosexuality bothers Jeremiah, he cannot understand it, and so Gabriel leaves with his boyfriend. Jeremiah wins a piano competition but he realizes he cannot use his skills effectively in his homeland among his people and so he starts working as a social worker.

The brothers reunite again due to the art. Gabriel helps Jeremiah to overcome his identity crisis and makes him play the piano to accompany his dance performances. They start to make shows together with success. However, Gabriel finds out he is HIV positive. When he is dying, he is kissed by the Fur Queen and taken to the spirit world.

Rose[12] (2003)

The musical *Rose* reintroduces the characters from the preceding plays (and several more are presented along). It opens with Emily Dictionary crying for her unborn child (she miscarried after being attacked by another woman). She is visited by two girls from her former motorcycle clan and they ask her to hit the road with them again to pay farewell to the chief of their clan, Rosabella, Emily's lover.

Meanwhile there is a fight between Big Joey and Chief Big Rose (Pelajia Patchnose) over the community hall which he wants to use as a casino. He gets involved with Italian mafia to get some money for it. Chief Big Rose wants to stop him but in the end she decides to support him instead because it would prevent the community from breaking up. She plans

[11] Tomson Highway, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (Canada: Doubleday Canada, 1998). All subsequent quotations are from this edition. An abbreviation of the title (*Kiss*) is used throughout the paper from now on.

[12] Tomson Highway, *Rose* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2003). All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

the opening ceremony for the casino and persuades the motorcycle girls to come as well. She is shot dead during the celebration.

Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout[13] (2005)

The play is designed as a string quartet for four women actors. The story is set in 1910 in Thompson River Valley and the women are preparing for the evening banquet which is held to honour the Prime Minister, Wilfrid Laurier. Ernestine Shuswap wants to prepare the biggest trout for him, Isabel picks berries to bake 624 saskatoon pies, Annabelle cooks a beaver and Delilah sews a tablecloth.

Tragic events caused by the land fights are revealed by the women's conversation and the dark undercurrent of the play strengthens as Delilah's insanity grows. Delilah married a white cowboy Billy and she is pregnant with him. However, she is driven mad by the fact she does belong neither to Native nor to the white community. She attacks herself by scissors in an attempt to get rid of the child whom she perceives as alien. The banquet turns to funeral. As the women prepare the table, a recording of the chief's speech resounds in the theatre in which the chief explains that Thompson River Valley people were left landless by the government treaties.

[13] Tomson Highway, *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2005). All subsequent quotations are from this edition. An abbreviation of the title (*Ernestine*) is used in the paper from now on.

3 Characters

The life of Tomson Highway has been a life of cultural crossing. He experienced the traditional caribou-hunting crusades in his childhood, he was taken to residential school, learnt English and later studied piano and worked in towns and cities worldwide. It was not easy to put up with the differences of his personal experience of multiculturalism and he reflects his observations and feelings in his work. The identity problems that the people of this society are faced with, the difficulties of searching for one's place in it are expressed by the characters of his plays and his novel and by their struggle to come to terms with their life and the people around them.

This chapter deals with various solutions of identity crisis discussed in Highway's work. The characters in his work are faced with the problems of postcolonial society. Their identity problems stem from the displacement of Native culture, from the disruption of traditional Native life caused by residential schools and oppressive policy of the white population. Analysis of the attitudes acquired by Highway's characters provided in this chapter is based on one of the most influential theories of postcolonial cultures, Bhabha's theory of mimicry. This concept explicates the problems of assimilation to the colonizing society. Bhabha's understanding of the situation in postcolonial society clarifies the reasons why these characters cannot achieve satisfaction in their position. An alternative solution of identity crisis, a return to the roots, is provided by Highway. This way, however, brings success neither according to Highway. The following discussion deals with the problems of identity, using the examples of various characters and illustrates the necessity to overcome the colonial experience which is expressed both in Bhabha's theory and Highway's work.

In general, there are two ways in which the characters establish their identity on. Firstly, they put on mimicry of the mainstream white society. They aim at assimilation to this society in hope of better opportunities and higher standard of life. The concept of mimicry, however, is not that straightforward. Homi K. Bhabha uses Lacan's definition of mimicry which is not "a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled – exactly like the technique of camouflage practised in human warfare."[1] The assimilation is problematized by this explanation of mimicry. If it is not harmonizing with the background, or society, but only pretending to be like the others,

[1] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Alan Sheridan (trans.) (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1977), 99.

the assimilation is not genuine and its objectives are not executed successfully. On the contrary, other problems arise which complicate the relationships in the postcolonial society. Bhabha talks about the "menace" of mimicry which originates from the ambivalence of mimicry that both discloses and stresses the difference between the colonized and the colonizing.[2] The threat lies in the disruption of the image of the dominating culture by the seemingly same, but not really the same image acquired by the colonized. Highway, however, is not concerned with the influence of mimicry on the mimicked society but on the mimicking subjects. He discusses what makes people undergo the camouflage and what the results are.

Following traditions or searching for them is the other way that Highway's characters choose to solve their identity struggle. They try to revive the old customs which would provide them with a continuation of their story disrupted by the residential schools or other repressive activity of the mainstream society. Highway explores both the possibilities in his characters' lives.

3.1 Searching for identity

The characters in Highway's work represent various ways of dealing with an identity crisis. Mimicry seems to be one of the options to get over it. Several characters in Highway's work choose this option.

In *The Rez Sisters* we meet the character of Annie Cook. She is a woman in her mid-thirties, with a special affection for Patsy Cline and country music in general. She is in love with a white country singer Fritz the Katz and she is very proud of her daughter to "live with this white guy in Sudbury."[3] In the middle of Act I, when the women speak out what they would do if they won the bingo, she dreams about going "to all the taverns and all the night clubs in Toronto and listen to the live bands while I drink beer quietly – not noisy and crazy like here."[4] She longs for being able to enjoy the pop culture as the people in the cities do, for drinking in a club not to push away all the troubles in one's life for a while but simply for having a good time. On the way to Toronto, she confides to Emily and expresses her wish to sing with a band and live with Fritz the Katz because she believes white men treat their

[2] Bhabha literally says: "The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority." For more details see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 121-131.
[3] Highway, *The Rez Sisters*, 12.
[4] Highway, *The Rez Sisters*, 37.

women better than Native men.[5] She wants to be integrated into the white society because she likes the entertainment it offers and because she believes it to be simply better. Emily calls her "Apple Indian Annie, red on the outside, white on the inside,"[6] which evokes the definition of mimicry. She behaves as a white person and in her dreams she feels to be one. In this play, Highway does not develop this character further but even in this brief description he makes her mimicking nature clear.

In *Rose* Annie's story continues. Her wish to live with Fritz the Katz came true but her ideas about white men treating women better appeared to be wrong. Fritz humiliates her by saying to her that she does not have the "right kind of personality to talk to important white people,"[7] by which he obviously means her race. Though she realizes that he considers her subordinate, she endures it because she does not want to go back to her community in which she is not happy either. Highway depicts the dead end she happens to be in – not accepting her Native identity and not being accepted by the white society. The only moment she achieves a success is when she is made to sing a song on stage replacing a missing singer. She sings perfectly despite having been neglected all the time by her boyfriend. Her dream to sing with a band is fulfilled but paradoxically, it is a Native band she sings with. Not accidentally she sings in the refrain:

> Been a long time, since I gone
> To the place where I belong;
> Oh the place where I belong
> Is the place where I'm, oh, all alone.[8]

She searches for her home, not knowing if it is better to live feeling alone in the rez where she came from or feeling alone in the society she wants to live in where she, however, cannot ever be at home.

Spooky Lacroix from *Dry Lips* chooses, similarly to Annie, to acquire the ways of white society but his reasons are different. Spooky's mimicry is expressed mainly by his devotion to Christianity which corresponds to the overall focus on religion in the play. He is introduced to the audience "knitting pale blue baby booties, singing with great emotion 'Everybody oughta know who Jesus is'."[9] Despite the fact that he is initially perceived as

[5] Highway, *The Rez Sisters*, 86.
[6] Highway, *The Rez Sisters*, 86.
[7] Highway, *Rose*, 76.
[8] Highway, *Rose*, 118.
[9] Highway, *Dry Lips*, 35.

mainly a comic character due to his endless preaching and knitting, the motives for this behaviour are grim enough. In the latter part of the play, it transpires that Spooky was once a normal guy like the others. He was friends with Big Joey, Creature Nataways and others and they would go to pubs and get drunk together. Just on the day they all swore to be friends forever, Spooky was attacked and beaten by seven white men.[10] He then performed a complete volte-face. Neither the details of the story nor the exact reason which lead Spooky to this decision, are articulated. The racial background of the attack and Spooky's decision to live in the safety of Christian lifestyle to prevent further violence on him is one of the possible interpretations. Even though he cannot change his race, he can at least make it clear that his religion is the same as the one of the white society. In other words, he manages to erase one of the differences which provoke racial attacks. In addition, the idea of Christian God, almighty and merciful, offers him hope of protection and justice, if not on earth, then at least in Heaven.

The other side of the coin is that he has alienated himself from his friends and community. Creature says to Spooky: "Cut the goddamn bull crap! I seen you crawl in the mud and shit so drunk you were snortin' like a pig."[11] Creature and other friends of his cannot understand the change: they look for the former drunk Spooky. They do not believe him his devout Christianity because this image does not correspond with the image he used to have. Spooky finds himself in a similar situation as Annie – his mimicry provides him with partial defense against violence but it deprives him of his companions. He is left alone to his knitting and preaching.

Both the characters of Annie and Spooky are outlined and their stories are of secondary significance to the plot. On the contrary, Jeremiah, one of the protagonists of the novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, is of course much more developed and his story of camouflage is described more fully. Jeremiah finds it very difficult to live in Winnipeg on his own: he is the only Native person in the school and has nobody to share his experience with. The only Native person he has seen in the city is a prostitute.[12] He understands that there is no other place in the society for a Native person and therefore he tries to become white. "He had worked so hard at transforming himself into a perfect little 'transplanted European' –

[10] The story is briefly narrated by Creature Nataways in the argument he has with Spooky in Highway, *Dry Lips*, 106.

[11] Highway, *Dry Lips*, 105.

[12] This is a reference to the final part of chapter twelve in which Jeremiah looks at a poster of a famous pianist and in the reflection of the window pane he takes notice of a Native girl being kicked out of a pub and hired by some passing men. In Highway, *Kiss*, 105-106.

anything to survive,"[13] says the narrator about Jeremiah. His mimicry enables him to endure his otherness, he is able to persuade himself that he is just the same as anyone else, that "his own skin is white as a parchment."[14] His mimicry allowed him to get over the initial shock and loneliness. It also allows him to study and work and his effort gets him as far as the prestigious piano competition. There, however, the camouflage fails.

The committee members of the competition are fascinated by his Native origin which he tried to hide so hard. His victory is presented as a victory of "Jeremiah Okimasis, the first Indian to win this gruelling contest in its forty-seven-year old history,"[15] not as a victory of a pianist with the best technique or the best interpretation. His mimicry betrays him and he is in public and with great splendour pronounced to be an Indian. As Krotz says, "Jeremiah is paradoxically both on display and overlooked."[16] He is admired but the people who praise him do not see him accurately because they look at him via their stereotypes. He realizes very quickly that he cannot change his origin, knowing that "he is one of them."[17] With this awareness he also recognizes the futility of his skill and knowledge because he can never use them in his homeland. His despair is crowned by an Indian girl (or is she the trickster?) who says to him in a bar: "You make me so proud to be a fuckin' Indian, you know that?"[18] Jeremiah's effort to become white ended in completely the opposite way by being recognized as Native both by the white and Native people. He failed to be integrated in the white society and paradoxically achieved to be re-integrated into the Native community without ever wanting to do so. It takes him years to overcome this experience and to find his real identity.

The imitative identity appears to be full of pitfalls for the characters. Frequently, they find themselves in a nowhere land, belonging neither to the people of their roots nor to the people that they wanted to be alike. Highway points out that these are the problems and questions of the identity based on camouflage. The mimicry provides only a temporary solution for their identity crisis: sooner or later their ambiguity is discovered. The menace of mimicry discussed by Bhabha is focused on the individual mimicking, not on the individuals mimicked, in Highway's plays. It is not the image of the white disrupted by camouflage but the notion of self of the Native people that is confused and betrayed by the mimicry. Although Highway perceives the threat of mimicry to lie somewhere else

[13] Highway, *Kiss*, 124.
[14] Highway, *Kiss*, 124.
[15] Highway, *Kiss*, 214.
[16] Sarah Wylie Krotz, "Productive Dissonance: Classical Music in Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*," *Studies in Canadian Literature,* Vol. 34, No. 1, 2009, 194.
[17] Highway, *Kiss*, 215.
[18] Highway, *Kiss*, 216.

than Bhabha does, they agree in the understanding of this phenomenon being conditioned by the colonizing–colonized opposition. Despite being created to hide it, mimicry is based on the colonial division of power which does not offer equal chances for the groups involved though mimicry. Highway proclaims the idea of stepping out from the colonial view of the world and promotes the idea of multiculturalism.

Apart from mimicry, there is another way of surviving the identity insecurity – searching for traditions. This form of survival in the confusion of values is represented by the character of Simon Starblanket in *Dry Lips*. He is dancing and chanting, holding a bustle in the first scene in which he appears and he keeps these attributes until he replaces the bustle with a gun in his final scene. He wants "the drum to come back" and the people "learn to dance again."[19] To revive the traditions he perceives as vital not only for him but for all his people. He speaks about his vision of the child in a rock that haunts him:

> I have my arms around this rock, this large black rock sticking out of the ground, right here on this spot. And then I hear this baby crying, from inside this rock. The baby is crying out my name. As if I am somehow responsible for it being caught inside that rock. I can't move. My arms, my whole body, stuck to this rock. Then this...eagle...lands beside me, right over there. But his bird has three faces, three women. And the eagle says to me: "the baby is crying, my grand-child is crying to hear the drum again." (...)
>
> Then the eagle is gone and the rock cracks and this mass of flesh, covered with veins and blood, comes oozing out and a woman's voice somewhere is singing something about angels and god and angels and god...[20]

The symbolic vision of a nation in the body of a child imprisoned in a rock waiting for Simon to rescue and to hear the drum again is very clear except for the ending. It is not a happy ending but what exactly goes wrong in the liberation of the nation is not easily understood. Simon's own story in the play serves as an explanation. His attitudes and believes are shattered as his girlfriend becomes the victim of a rape. He is faced with the gender difference between Christianity and Native mythology which he cannot understand. He asks Nanabush/Patsy: "If God, you are a woman/man in Cree but only a man in da Englesa, then how come you still got a cun..."[21] He is not able to comprehend the rape because the genders and gods are confused. He does not understand how the trickster could be raped by false God

[19] Highway, *Dry Lips*, 43.
[20] Highway, *Dry Lips*, 45.
[21] Highway, *Dry Lips*, 113.

and if God in the Christian sense is the right one how is it possible that he has female sex when he is male. He falls back on his traditional identity and on Native mythological explanation of the world, excluding any other possibilities. The events, however, show that one cannot simply close his or her eyes on Christianity and other cultural foundations upon which people build their identities. They all exist in the environment of the rez and so they all have to be taken into consideration.

There was a warning in his vision in the image of the "woman's voice singing something about angels and god."[22] It is an evident allusion to Christianity. Instead of a child, a mass of flesh comes out of the rock while a song about angels is heard. The disintegration of Native people suggested by the dismembering of the child into flesh, veins and blood and the presence of Christianity in the act should have warned Simon. It is not possible to liberate the people and omit the other present influences because only parts and not the whole identity would emerge consequently.

Ruffo tries to find an answer for Simon's death, which appears to be rather obscure, and says: "Perhaps it is to emphasize that the path to self-determination and cultural renewal is marked by sacrifice and death, or illustrates the age-old adage that the individual who stands alone is ultimately weak and easily defeated."[23] Nevertheless, it is important to notice that the trickster is present at Simon's death; he drops his gun in the moment she stands before him moving the bustle. From this point of view, Simon's death is not a defeat of the tradition, neither is it a sacrifice for the next generations. Although the trickster is present, she does not prevent the tragedy from happening and her role in the scene is very ambiguous. She does not save him even though he defends the mythology that she represents. It is not victory of one or the other mythology, it cannot be said the death is caused by the cultural collision or identity crisis despite the fact that Simon undoubtedly struggles with these problems. It is an accident, bad luck, the trickster's evil trick.

Adopting and following one of the discussed ways of combating the crisis of self provides the characters with at least a temporary stability of their identity. The environment they live in sooner or later shatters their belief, and yet they manage to survive on account of it. Some of the characters in Highway's plays are able to choose and follow neither of the ways and they end up in the cultural and emotional clash. Their stories are described in the following subchapter.

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[22] Highway, *Dry Lips*, 45.

[23] Armand Garnet Ruffo, "Exposing the Poison, Staunching the Wound: Applying Aboriginal Healing Theory to Literary Analysis," *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1/2, 2009, 101.

3.2 Characters in the cultural clash

The brutal rape of Patsy in *Dry Lips* is committed by Dickie Bird. Dickie Bird is a boy born with a foetal alcohol syndrome. He cannot speak properly and he is emotionally unstable. He feels lost and lonely in the world because he does not know who his father is and so there is nobody to serve as a model to him. He is even more confused by the two solutions offered to him by his friends Spooky and Simon. It is obvious which ways they try to put him on – Spooky tries to convert him to Christianity and Simon wants him to follow the traditions. The tension imposed on him intensifies during the first hockey match. Dickie Bird is "caught between Simon's chanting and Spooky's praying"[24] and knowing not what to do, Dickie Bird screams and collapses surrounded by both the men and the trickster standing over him.

Act II then opens by: "Dickie Bird Halked standing on a rock in the forest, his clothes and hair all askew. He holds Spooky's crucifix, raised with one hand up to the sky; he is trying, as best he can, to chant, after Simon Starblanket's fashion."[25] He is not able to choose from the suggested paths and so he combines them in a desperate frenzy. His confusion, fear and sense of not belonging lead in the end to the violent attack he performs. The violence rises form his desperate need to express his identity and because he could not find any other way to do it, he is compelled to use the most extreme means. He takes advantage of the male and Christian sense of conquest and rapes the trickster representing the female-oriented Native mythology.

It is significant that the rape scene follows after the conversation of Dickie Bird and Nanabush/Black Lady in which Dickie Bird tries to persuade his mother to tell him who his father is. The conversation ends by Dickie's quiet admittance: "It's true what they say, isn't it? I'm a bastard, aren't I? (...) My father is ... Big Joey."[26] The ensuing violence can be therefore read as a continuation of the tragic events caused by people caught up in identity crisis; Big Joey's mistreatments are followed by his son's errors. As the audience learns later on, Big Joey is haunted by the vision of female blood, by the female creative ability. The imbalance of male and female entities in his mind causes his rude and violent behaviour towards women. He perceives them as a threat to men's power and he traces the origin of this

[24] Highway, *Dry Lips*, 73.
[25] Highway, *Dry Lips*, 79.
[26] Highway, *Dry Lips*, 97.

feeling to the defeat at the Wounded Knee.[27] The violence and tragic events happening in the rez are all results of the cultural collision.

A similar example of identity crisis ending in violence is depicted in the play *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout*. There is the character of Delilah Rose, a Native girl who married a white cowboy, Billy. At first, the difference between them is what makes him attractive to her. She explains that she fell in love with him because of his "hair like straw and eyes like emeralds, because he was different, because he was special."[28] Love is the bond which resolves the differences into marriage. However, Delilah gets into a conflict of interests after some time and cannot find her way out. She is asked by her sisters to leave her husband. By contrast, the local Catholic priest asks her to leave her Native community and live with his family. Although her love bridged the difference between herself and her husband, it cannot traverse the differences between the two communities she gets involved in. She is stuck in a quandary of "love and hate, love and hate,"[29] as she keeps repeating, and there is nothing she can do. Her feeling of entrapment is strengthened even more by her pregnancy. Being unable to decide which community she should choose, she starts to perceive her child as the reason for her estrangement. She says:

> What was she to do? There was a white man in her stomach, yes, a white man in her stomach, a white man who *communed with the devil*,[30] yes, the devil, right there in her stomach, in her stomach, in her flesh, in her veins, in her blood. So what was she to do, huh, what the hell was she to do? (...)
>
> She would cut it out with scissors, cut it out, cut it out, cut it out like a little paper doll. And the she would be free, yes, then she would be free, free to return to the land of her ... the land of her ... her what, though? What land, what kind of land, what kind of culture?[31]

The baby who was supposed to be the symbol of a cultural union turns out to be the very opposite. She cannot bear the idea of bearing to the world somebody not like her, somebody

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[27] Highway, *Dry Lips*, 119–120.
[28] Highway, *Ernestine*, 47.
[29] Highway, *Ernestine*, 77.
[30] There are several jokes and ridiculing comments on Protestants in the play which express the negative attitude of the community towards Protestantism. Ernestine, for example, says that "when Catholics die, they go straight to heaven, when Protestants die, they go for a coffee and then they go to hell." The disapproval of Protestantism culminates in the above-quoted speech by Delilah, as her disturbance rises. In Highway, *Enerstine*, 40-41.
[31] Highway, *Ernestine*, 85.

not exclusively of her own flesh. Unable to break this impasse, she attempts to solve her problem by violence, similarly to Dickie, and stabs herself with the scissors. She realizes that there is nowhere to go for her because she lost her home in Thompson River Valley community and she has not been accepted to the white community on account of her origin either. Being trapped in between the cultures, she chooses death as the last resort.

The clash of the cultures is a source of identity crises for the characters. They are not able to follow any of the routes suggested because the choice inevitably means losing some aspect or some people from their lives. Driven crazy by fear and loneliness, they release the pressure put upon them by violence. By the examples of these two characters, Highway demonstrates the negative results of the collision of cultures. It also shows that if Native people are to survive without such tragedies happening, another way must be sought.

For most people dealing with identity problems, life in the rez in contemporary Canada opens two possibilities – either trying to be as similar as possible to the white community or trying to revive Native traditions. Highway, however, points out the pitfalls of both of them. Choosing one of the paths and excluding the other appears to mislead the characters and they are faced with the clash of cultures in its various forms anyway. Highway emphasizes that such problems have been in the rez communities for more than a century now and that a change is needed.

The way he proposes is characterized by embracing all the influences existing in the rez and coming up with a new, multi-layered identity. Only this can prevent other collisions and avert the tragedies caused by cultural confusion. This idea is reflected in the structure of his work and in the elaboration of the themes discussed in the following chapters.

4 The Trickster

Nanabush or Weesageechak or in English, "the trickster," is a central figure of Native Canadian mythology. He appears in many traditional Native tales as well as in contemporary Native literature. Tomson Highway has been particularly interested in this figure, and together with two other authors he founded The Committee to Re-Establish the Trickster in 1996.[1] The name of the committee poses a question about the presence of trickster in contemporary Native culture. Daniel David Moses, one of the committee members, talks about rediscovering the trickster; similarly, other critics write that the trickster has been forgotten or that "he has gone into hiding."[2] The intervention of white culture has eroded the traditional image of trickster in contemporary Native culture. Native literature of the past three decades tries to define a new vision of the trickster that characterises modern Native culture. Tomson Highway has tried to create an updated image that reflects the trickster in Canadian multicultural society.

The mythological explanation of the trickster is clearly defined by Paul Radin in his study. In the introduction he says:

> Trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself. He wills nothing consciously. At all times he is constrained to behave as he does from impulses over which he has no control. He knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being. But not only he, so our myth tells us, possesses these traits. So, likewise, do the other figures of the plot connected with him: the animals, the various supernatural beings and monsters,and man.[3]

The mythological trickster is not a thoughtful creator but rather a spontaneous, impulsive being and his productive power is extemporaneous. He embodies contradictory essences of good and evil, which distinguishes him from central characters of European mythologies in which the positive and negative essences are almost always clearly delineated.

[1] Daniel David Moses, "The Trickster's Laugh My Meeting with Tomson and Lenore," *The American Indian Quaterly*, Vol. 28, No. 1&2, 2004, 109.

[2] Lina Perkins, "Remembering the Trickster in Tomson Highway's The Rez Sisters," *Modern Drama*, Vol. 45, No. 2, 2002, 260 and 262.

[3] Paul Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (London: Routledge, 1956), ix.

The archetypal image of the world he represents is unpredictable and deceptive, but also frenetic and animated.

Highway says that the trickster "goes by many names and many guises"[4] and explains him as "essentially a comic, clownish sort of character, he teaches us about the nature and the meaning of existence on the planet Earth."[5] Highway follows the archetypal definition of the trickster as a figure clarifying mysteries of the world but he is more concerned with the trickster's facetious nature. The comicality of the trickster in Highway's work comes often from his ability to represent contradictory notions and perform in opposing directions. The unpredictability and spontaneity of the trickster, which is prominent in Radin's definition, is a source of humour in Highway's works. However, it is important to mention that Paul Radin explains the trickster from an anthropological and mythological point of view, whereas Highway uses him as an artistic character which shifts the trickster from the mythological to the literary sphere. Consequently, the archetypal quality of the trickster in traditional tales shifts from metaphysical to an actual representation of culture and people.

4.1 The Trickster vs Christ

The parallel of the trickster in Native mythology and Christ in Christianity has been openly stated by Tomson Highway in his note on Nananbush which appears as a foreword to most of his published plays and to his novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. He writes that the trickster is "as pivotal and important a figure in the Native world as Christ is in the realm of Christian mythology."[6] Later on he writes that the trickster "straddles the consciousness of man and that of God, the Great Spirit."[7] Christ, man and God in one body, possesses the same ambiguous nature that exists in the convergence of the divine and the human that the trickster does. Though the trickster and Christ match in this basic quality, they differ significantly in other features. Coming back to Radin, the trickster is, because of his unpredictibility and spontaneity, a difficult character to depend on: he can be treacherous and unreliable. Christ, on the other hand, is the only Son of absolute and perfect God and so he is represented as steadfast and righteous. These differences affect the way morality is learned

[4] Highway, *The Rez Sisters*, xii.
[5] Highway, *The Rez Sisters*, xii.
[6] Highway, *The Rez Sisters*, xii.
[7] Highway, *The Rez Sisters*, xii.

in the respective cultures. Denis W. Johnston says, "Because Nanabush is also mischievous and fallible, unlike Christ in European tradition, the Native listener must exercise his own judgment to learn from Nanabush's adventures, whereas Christ's followers only obey precept and example."[8] Although Johnston's statement oversimplifies the way Christians learn morality, the ambiguity of the trickster undoubtedly complicates and confuses one's understanding of the world.

The trickster might be the trickier teacher but he is also a funnier one. Highway says: "Human existence isn't a struggle for redemption to the trickster, it's fun, a joyous celebration."[9] The story of Christ is full of suffering and repentance which is redeemed by eternal life in Heaven. For the trickster, and Native mythology in general, it is the terrestrial life which should be lived to the fullest, accepting tears as well as laughter with celebration. This celebratory vision of the world corresponds with the image of the trickster as a clown.The similarity and differences of Christ and the trickster created a source of productive imagining for Highway. He uses them frequently in his work, both in the resemblance and the disparity.

The trickster or, as he is called in the play, Nanabush, takes on traditional guise in *The Rez Sisters* at first. He appears in the form of a seagull, later on as a nighthawk and for most of the play he remains watching and dancing. In Act II he changes into a bingo master and controls and moderates all the action on the stage. This is also where Highway relates him to Christ: the scene evokes The Last Supper.[10] Barbara Pell perceives this combination of consumerist activity and Christian symbolism as "a satire on the consumerism of the white society and the debasement of Christian religion."[11] The image of Christ as a bingo master is undoubtedly satirical, however, Pell's statement seems to be rather harsh. Christianity is not totally rejected in the play, even though it is often ridiculed (Veronique remains a devoted Catholic throughout the play despite being laughed at). The scene rather shows the absurdity and incoherence of Native conditions today. There are many incongruous elements -- Christ, the trickster, bingo, Native women, a crucifix and potato chips. This is the confusion the Native people exist in, and though Christianity is depicted as unfitting, it is not for any

[8] Denis W. Johnston, "Lines and Circles: The Rez Plays of Tomson Highway," *Canadian Literature*, Vol. 124-125, 1990, 255.

[9] Johnston, Lines and Circles, 255.

[10] According to the stage instructions, there should be a long table with a crucifix in the middle and suggestive lights. In Highway, *The Rez Sisters*, 102.

[11] Barbara Pell, "George Ryga's 'Hail Mary' and Tomson Highway's Nanabush: Two Paradigms of Religion and Theatre in Canada," *TRiC*, Vol. 27, No. 1, 2006, 253.

inherent falsehood of its core ideas or principles but rather for its inapplicability to the Native question.

The transformation of Nanabush from a watching bird into acting bingo master/Christ is not accidental. Christ in The Last Supper was the leader giving his last orders and advice to his apostles which would grant them life in Heaven. The women in the play listen to the bingo master and his announcements in the hope of being rewarded in the same way. However, the number they need for victory is not called by the bingo master and so they "throw him out of the way."[12] It can be read as a symbolical rejection of Christ by the rez after which the trickster changes into the nighthawk and escorts Marie-Adele to the spirit world. It is important to mention that it is still Nanabush in the guise of the bingo master and consequently also in the image of Christ at The Last Supper. It is part of his trick to appear as Christ. After this scene of chaos and cultural confusion comes revelation of the message the trickster in Pelajia's speech:

> Best bingo game we've ever been to in our lives, huh? You know, life's like that, I figure. When all is said and done. Kinda' silly, innit, this business of living? But. What choice do we have? When some fool of a being goes and puts us Indians plunk down in the middle of this old earth, dishes out this lot we got right now. But. I figure we gotta make the most of it while we're here.[13]

The biggest bingo in the world and the women's journey to it was the lesson of the trickster. They learned to work together for a purpose, they managed to get the most they could from their skills. On their way to Toronto they also disclosed their sorrows to one another, and managed to comfort each other. In Toronto they experienced a thrilling show followed by a great loss. This is the nature of the world the trickster shows them. The world they were born to is not perfect and it is not fair (the character of the trickster comes to mind) but since their time here is limited they should live it as best as they can with all it brings. If it was Christ's lesson it would be about enduring the pain and being rewarded in the afterlife.

There is a similar Last Supper scene in the play *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout*. In this case Wilfrid Laurier, Prime Minister of Canada in 1910, represents Christ and the chiefs represent the apostles.[14] The image of a white politician whose actions lead to Shushwap nation losing their land in connection with Christ is emblematic. Christ is again the controlling character: any objection to his rules is futile. Laurier/Christ represents

[12] Highway, *The Rez Sisters*, 103.
[13] Highway, *The Rez Sisters,* 105.
[14] As indicated in the intructions in Highway, *Ernestine*, 88.

the oppresive culture and religion that took Native land and threatened to destroy Native culture.

The trickster and Christ as central mythological figures also meet in Highway's novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. The Okimasis brothers are confronted with both of them and face their differences. The brothers encounter Christ in the residential school they are sent to. Christian religion, which was alien to them,[15] is soon connected with sexual abuse. The abuse is described by the image of the priest's pendant in the shape of crucifix lying on Gabriel's lips and slowly entering his mouth:

> The subtly trobbing motion of the priest's upper body made the naked Jesus Christ – this sliver of silver light, this fleshly Son of God so achingly beautiful – rub his body against the child's lips, over and over and over again. Gabriel had no strength left. The pleasure in his centre welled so deep that he was about to open his mouth and swallow whole the living flesh – in his half-dream state, this man nailed to the cross was a living, breathing man, tasting like Gabriel's most favourite food, warm honey.[16]

Gabriel is forced to accept Christ's body in the perverted exctasy of rape. The priest makes him take this communion of Christ's flesh by abusing the boy's own. The rape is not only physical but also mythological and religious. Eating human flesh is taboo in Native mythology and it is connected with the evil character – the windigo. The priest is subsequently described as a windigo by Jeremiah, who is observing the scene.[17] Highway combines both mythologies and deliberately shifts the characters from the Christian realm to the Native one by turning the Christian priest into a windigo. By this he expresses the cultural collision and confusion that the boys were faced with. It is important to mention that in this case Christ is not the agent of the action, he is used as the symbolic object of the rape performed by the priest. In other words, Christianity as such is not the evil destroying Native life but Christianity in the hands of wicked people is made evil.

The sexual abuse changed Christianity into nightmare for the boys and made it unacceptable for them. The body of Christ does not lead them to redemption but to disaster, especially in Gabriel's case, as his promiscuous sexual life is haunted by the vision

[15] As described in chapter six of the novel, when Jeremiah is looking at religious pictures he searches in vain for one Native person, and God reminds him of his neighbour dressed up as Santa Claus. Highway, *Kiss*, 58.

[16] Highway, *Kiss*, 78–79.

[17] The passage mentioned goes on: "Visible only in silhouette, for all Jeremiah knew it might have been a bear devouring a honey-comb, or the Weetigo feasting on human flesh." In Highway, *Kiss*, 79.

of the crucifix.[18] As meeting the image of Christ was a crucial negative experience for the boys, meeting the trickster signals a new start. Jeremiah finds himself at a dead-end in his career of concert pianist in Northern Manitoba. There is no opportunity to apply his knowledge and skills there, filling him with despair and a sense of displacement. The trickster meets him to tell him her message (the trickster shows up in the guise of white female fox playing piano in this case). She draws his attention to the experience he has forgotten for all the beautiful European music, the experience which is central to the trickster character and his Native culture: fun and entertainment. At first, Jeremiah does not understand the message she is trying to deliver:

> Why are you putting on a show five thousand miles north of Caesars Palace?
> ... Because they need me here, honeypot. Name a place, they need me.
> I don't get it.
> Why do you think I put on these faaabulous shows?
> To entertain?
> And why do I entertain?
> Well ...
> Because without entertainment, honeypot, without distraction, without dreams, life's a drag. No?[19]

She shows him by her directness that he has taken himself too seriously and was stuck in his misery. He can either go on in his self-pity ("oh, boo-hoo-hoo-hoo, poor me, oh, boo"[20] as the trickster puts it) or step over it and gain the distance needed for creating fun. Only the latter solution, however, would include him in the great show which is called the world.

The fox does not forget to make it clear who is running the show. She says:

> Show me the bastard who come up with this notion that who's running the goddamn show is some grumpy, embittered, sexually frustrated old fart with a long white beard hiding like a gutless coward behind some puffed-up cloud and I'll slice his goddamn balls off.[21]

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[18] Gabriel's sexual affairs are accompanied by the crucifix, imagined or in the form of pendant in the novel. His kiss with his lover Gregory Newman is, for example, described in the following way: "In the moonlight, Gabriel's face, his neck were bathed by male breath, hot, minty. Until the silvery, naked Jesus that hung from the chain around this whiteman's neck came to rest across his own neck, hard, cold." In Highway, *Kiss*, 204.

[19] Highway, *Kiss*, 232–233.

[20] Highway, *Kiss*, 233.

[21] Highway, *Kiss*, 234.

She points out the difference between the serious Christian view of the world and the Cree comic and insouciant one. It is up to him which way to choose: to view life as an opportunity to have fun or as a series of years of suffering.

The nature of the trickster differs significantly from the nature of Christ, even though they are both central mythological figures with the same god-human quality and with the same mission to teach people about life on earth. However, they vary in many features and also in the message they send to people. In addition, Christianity was connected with social and sexual abuse of Native people, turning Christ's teaching to oppression. Unfortunately, the differences between the mythologies discussed often led to disaster, as described in the following chapter.

4.2 The Trickster in the cultural clash

The collision of mythologies caused by the differences in their principles has been implied already in the previous chapter. A direct and very violent clash appears, however, in another of Highway's plays, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. In this play, another contradictory aspect of Native mythology and Christianity is raised – gender.

In his note on Nanabush preceding this play, Highway explains the sexual neutrality or rather sexual ambiguity of the trickster:

> The most explicit distinguishing feature between the North American Indian languages and the European languages is that in Indian (e. g. Cree, Ojibway), there is no gender. In Cree, Ojibway, etc., unlike English, French, German, etc., the male-female-neuter hierarchy is entirely absent. So that by this system of thought, the central hero figure from our mythology – theology, if you will – is theoretically neither exclusively male nor exclusively female, or is both simultaneously.[22]

In addition, Native mythology, though neutral in gender, tends to femininity, as can be seen in the initial creative character – Mother Earth.[23] Christianity, in opposition, is very male-centred. God is presented as a bearded man and his son Jesus Christ is male as well.

[22] Highway, *Dry Lips*, 12.

[23] Mother Earth, however, embodies both female and male features. As Highway says in his lecture *Comparing Mythologies:* "God – most essentially, is one big fat he/she. Meaning to say that God, even though she may be female in shape biologically in the context of Aboriginal mythology, is both male and female simultaneously, emotionally, spiritually, intellectually." In Tomson Highway, *Comparing Mythologies*, (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2002) 40-41.

The female entity is present in the figure of Virgin Mary. Her feminine creative power is, nevertheless, diminished by the fact she conceived only when pervaded by the Holy Spirit.

Highway stresses this difference in gender orientation of the mythologies in the play and let them collide in the most brutal gender attack – rape. Dickie Bird, a boy suffering from the results of foetal alcohol syndrome, rapes Nanabush in the guise of Patsy, a pregnant girl. Symbols of the opposing mythologies as well as of the opposing genders clash in the attack. There is a boy with a crucifix, used as a phallus, and there is a girl from a medicine man family in late stage of pregnancy. The rape is an extreme representation of cultural and sexual abuse. The crucifix, which is the instrument of rape, symbolises the phallus but its action annihilates rather than conceives. The rape negates both masculine positive power as a semen donor and feminine power of breeding new life. McKegney says, "the rape could be considered anti-creative because it bears the capacity to cause its pregnant victim to miscarry, making it a sadistic parody of copulation whose offspring is death rather than life."[24] Importantly, both Christ and the trickster are present in the scene. Trickster is in the guise of Patsy and crucifix is the symbol of Christ. Highway confronts their differences in such an extreme way to express the utmost suffering and pain of the Native people caused by the cultural clash.

Nevertheless, Highway is not a pessimist. The last scene of the play depicts Zachary and Hera with their newborn little girl. They play with her and Hera's "silvery, Nanabush laugh"25 together with the baby's laughter echoes in the theatre. The creative power of Nanabush was not destroyed in the clash and it survives, especially in the female characters and their power to breed a new life.

4.3 Changeability of the trickster

The trickster takes on many guises. In traditional tales he usually transforms into an animal such as a coyote, raven, eagle, bear etc. He can also acquire human form and act as a person. Ability to change is connected with the unpredictability of his deeds: one can never know which form he is going to show up in and what end his activity will have, good or bad. Highway introduces the trickster in many forms and in various settings and takes advantage of his transformative power to represent the idea of multiculturalism.

[24] Sam McKegney, "From Trickster Poetics to Transgressive Politics," *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, Vol. 17, No. 4, 2005, 99.
[25] Highway, *Dry Lips*, 130.

In terms of the traditional appearance of the trickster, Highway presents him as a seagull and a nighthawk in *The Rez Sisters*. Later on, however, he changes into the bingo master, i. e. he takes on human form and he shifts from the rez setting to the Euro-Canadian setting of a bingo hall in Toronto. Even in his traditional animal form he does not necessarily represent Native culture exclusively. In his production notes, Highway writes: "The role of Nanabush in The *Rez Sisters* is to be played by a male dancer – modern, ballet, or traditional."[26] So there is an option to introduce the trickster, for example, in the form of a seagull dancing ballet. Highway uses the changeability of the trickster and constructs his character deliberately from elements of both Native and Euro-Canadian culture.

The multicultural image of the trickster is more prominent in other Highway's plays. There is a female trickster in *Dry Lips* who appears alternately with a powwow bustle, bottle of beer, and a rosary and she momentarily sits or stands on a flashing jukebox.[27] The jukebox appears in *Rose* as well, together with the trickster as Rosabella Jean Baez in a leather jacket riding a motorcycle.[28] In *Kiss of the Fur Queen* the trickster transforms into the queen and later on shows up as a female fox playing a piano.[29] This is a very different image of a trickster from the traditional coyote one. Highway equips the trickster with props emblematic of different cultural streams – the bustle of Native culture, the rosary of Christianity, and a bottle of beer and jukebox of Euro-Canadian pop culture.

Even though these things might seem odd juxtaposed in this fashion, they are part of contemporary life of Native people. The trickster reflects the people's lives; his image has changed as life on the rez has changed. It is no longer only about powwow sessions and drumming, it is also about listening to Patsy Cline in a bar drinking beer, or about going to church on Sunday for a mass. This immense change in the nature and image of the trickster might be a source of insecurity about his presence. Perkins, for example talks about the "forgotten or hidden trickster."[30] The trickster has changed significantly and it might not be easy to recognise him now. Highway, however, stresses that he is still present, though in modern form. Looking for him in the old traditional image is misleading and the search cannot be successful. Paul Radin says that trickster is a representation of the world and of the people. Highway adds that though the essence of the trickster is the clown and that

[26] Highway, *The Rez Sisters*, xi.
[27] Based on the play instructions in *The Rez Sisters*– powwow bustle p. 41, bottle of beer and rosary p. 52, jukebox p. 77 and 82.
[28] Highway, *Rose*, 14.
[29] Highway, *Kiss*, 231.
[30] Lina Perkins, Remembering, 262.

the trickster as deceiver is still the same, he has learned new tricks and new guises and this is the reason Native people had problems recognising him and themselves in his image. They were standing in front of a mirror wearing leather jacket and a baseball cap expecting to see a bear.

The character of the trickster appears to be a representative of both Native culture and multiculturalism in Highway's work. He keeps his essential treacherous and comic nature but he takes on different guises than in the traditional tales. He becomes a singing girl on a motorcycle, a bingo master or a praying pregnant woman. His changing persona expresses many features of contemporary life on the rez – pop culture as well as mixed Christian and Native mythology. Trickster is a Native mythological character but he deliberately acquires Christian elements in Highway's work. In some cases Highway ridicules Christianity and its seriousness by trickster's resemblance to Christ, in other cases he points out the necessity of reconciliation with Christian influence on Native people. It has become part of the rez through the years, and though Christianity can pose problems because it does not correspond with Native mythology, it cannot be totally rejected either.

The chameleon nature of the trickster reflects the contradictory features of contemporary Native society. However, by embodying them in one character, Highway also reconciles these features and uses them creatively. He takes also advantage of the comical effect these contradictions evoke, stressing the clownish nature of the trickster. Highway's trickster delivers the important message to his people that it is possible to be Native and still have a place in multicultural society. His changeability is what allows him to survive. And more importantly, survive laughing.

5 Dramatic techniques

Highway's artistic voice did not come to him until he was in his thirties. It was not easy to find a common ground for his Euro-Canadian education on one hand and on his Native experience on the other. Nevertheless, it was worth waiting for. The style he developed in his writing emerged to speak truly for his generation and came to be highly inspiring for other aboriginal writers. Highway describes his style in the following statement:

> What I really find fascinating about the future of my life, the life of my people, the life of my fellow Canadians is the searching for this new voice, this new identity, this new tradition, this magical transformation that potentially is quite magnificent. It is the combination of the best of both worlds ... combining them and coming up with something new.[1]

So what is the best of both worlds that he uses as far as dramatic techniques are concerned? The subsequent analysis will be based on Highway's dramatic work because that is where the core of his writing lies. Most of the elements, however, can also be traced in his novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. Highway's choice of drama as his key genre is not accidental. He takes theatre as "a natural extension of the oral storytelling tradition."[2] Storytelling and theatre are both based on spoken word, on the ability of the speaker to captivate by his words and they are both performed in immediate time. The similarity is recognized by another Native Canadian playwright and critic, Drew Hayden Taylor, who observes:

> Looking back at the roots and origins and traditional storytelling, not just Native storytelling but storytelling in general, it is the process of taking your audience on a journey, using your voice, your body and the spoken word. Moving that journey onto the stage is merely the next logical step.[3]

Dramas by Tomson Highway confirm this statement, representing a new development of the traditional storytelling. The structure of the plays, however, comes from the Euro-Canadian literary tradition. The plays are divided into acts and scenes, though

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[1] Anne Nothof, "Cultural collision and magical transformation: The Plays of Tomson Highway," *Studies in Canadian Literature*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 1995, 35.

[2] Hartmut Lutz, *Contemporary Challenges* (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1991), 95.

[3] Drew Hayden Taylor: "Alive and Well: Native Theatre in Canada," in Roc Appleford (ed.): *Aboriginal Drama and Theatre. Critical Perspectives on Canadian Theatre in English*, Vol. 1, Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2005, 29.

the borders of individual scenes are not usually explicitly defined. *The Rez Sisters, Dry Lips* and *Ernestine Shuswap* all consist of two acts. There are no scene markings but the development of the plot and the concomitant change of characters is very clear-cut. Highway often uses the word "scene" in screen notes, which signals he designs the play as segmented in scenes. The musical *Rose* is an exception to this scheme. It has three acts and the scenes are distinguished in the text. The sequence of scenes tends to be very quick and some of them are structured as images containing little or no action.[4] The lively and speedy changing of the scenes might occasionally give an impression of chaos and it is sometimes hard not to lose orientation in the plot. This might be one of the reasons why this play has not been as popular as the others and why it has not been professionally staged until this day.

The plots of the plays are easily distinguishable and narrated mainly chronologically, with occasional lapses into the past (especially in *Rose*). The unity of time and place is not entirely followed, but there are no unpredictable or unusual time and place shifts. The action of *Ernestine Shuswap* spans over one day, compared to one week in *Dry Lips*, a few weeks in *The Rez Sisters* and half a year in *Rose*. Highway's work with time and setting is masterly but there is nothing modern that audience would not already be familiar with.

In comparison to traditional Euro-Canadian drama, there are some differences in the structure of the plot and categorization of characters in Native drama. One of the differences is that Native playwrights tend to build their plays without any great climax or conflict. Drew Hayden Taylor says that "European drama is based on conflict; the story progresses through conflict, information is perceived through conflict."[5] He further observes that the lack of conflict is one of the most significant distinctions between Native and European drama. He also explains that absence of conflict and general tendency to avoid any discord in Native storytelling and society as such comes from the effort to maintain harmony in the community.[6]

Most of the plays by Highway can be described as lacking in conflict and climax. *The Rez Sisters*, the first play which achieved wider attention, is a good example. It tells a story of seven women going to bingo in Toronto and nothing actually dramatic happens

[4] Scene 30, 34 A and B, 36 in Act III are examples of such images. In Highway, *Rose*, 128, 136 and 140.

[5] Drew Hayden Taylor, Alive and Well, 32.

[6] Drew Hayden Taylor says: "If somebody had a problem, or if somebody was angry and wanted to make a very aggressive point about something, it was frowned upon and discouraged because conflict would infringe upon the harmony of the community and therefore its survival. Overt or aggressive conflict was actively and urgently discouraged within the family group and this manifested itself within stories, too." In Drew Hayden Taylor, Alive and Well, 32–33.

although there are allusions to personal conflicts in the stories of the women. Klára Kolinská sums up the static nature of the plot in the following way: "In a sense, the stories that the characters in Highway's play tell are the most important events. There is not much beside that: seven Native women want to go to the city to play bingo, they go to the city and play, they do not win anything special and go back home."[7] The bingo scene as such functions as the climax of the play but in terms of conventional drama there is no open conflict in the scene and no resolution ensuing. The lives of the women are pretty much the same as they used to be and the trickster's message which should serve as the message of the play is not delivered by any specific activity or direct dialogue. The same quality of plot is adhered to in the play *Ernestine Shuswap*. There are four women who are preparing for an evening banquet, they pick berries, cook and in the end set the table. Although there is a dramatic event, Delilah's insanity and suicide, it does not really influence the development of the plot as such. The sense of a climax is also weakened by the absence of main characters. None of the characters who take part in some kind of collision is the protagonist and, as a result, the events cannot be defined as crucial to the plot. This also holds true for the only conflict in Highway's plays which could be classified as a climax – the rape in *Dry Lips*. Dickie Bird who commits the attack is one of the seven male characters and he is not given any particular prominence among the others.

The categorization of the characters represents another difference between traditional European and Native drama, particularly visible in Highway's plays. Highway's typical cast of characters counts from 4 to 17 actors, none of them being the main one. In *The Rez Sisters* there are seven women and a male trickster and in *Dry Lips* the same number of cast with gender reversed. *Ernestine Shuswap* introduces only four women but even though the play is named after one of them, she is not the main one and neither are the others. The actors in *Rose* are even more numerous and the protagonist is absent as well, which may give rise to a sense of chaos and disorganization that possibly prevented the play from being staged. The plots of the plays are therefore in fact sets of minor stories of individual characters which conjure up an image of life in the community. There is no central story connected with the protagonist, the main action of the dramas is also collective – women go together to bingo, men discuss the women playing hockey, women prepare dinner together. The absence

[7] "To, co si postavy Highwayovy hry vyprávějí, je v jistém smyslu tím nejdůležitějším, co se stane. Jinak toho není moc: sedm Indiánek z rezervace chce jet do města na bingo, jede na bingo, nic moc nevyhraje a zase se vrátí domů." (translation mine) In Klára Kolinská, *Čekání na Kojota: Současné drama kanadských Indiánů* (Brno: Větrné mlýny, 2007), 540.

of a clearly defined main character is one of the features of Native drama, although the interest in collective cast seems to be characteristic of Highway himself.[8]

Apart from the focus on collective plays, Highway typically produces tragicomedies, which is one of the specific features distinguishing him from other Native Canadian playwrights. His plays are rich in humour but there is always a sense of tragedy in the background of the stories or of a looming catastrophe. In comparison with other Native playwrights, the combination of comedy and tragedy is used as a significant and repetitive element only in his work. Drew Hayden Taylor, a dramatist of mixed origin, stresses humour, writing comedies dealing with social issues (*Someday, Only Drunks and Children Tell the Truth*). Daniel David Moses, on the other hand, focuses on catastrophes and collisions of the Native and white cultures, dead people and spirits being his favourite characters (as in *Coyote City* or *Almighty Voice and His Wife*, for example). Other playwrights tend towards tragedy as well, which can be interpreted as a logical reflection of the traumas and social disasters that have affected Native communities until recently (e.g. Wendy Lill, Shirley Cheechoo, John McLeod, Jim Morris).[9]

Despite some divergences, the structure of Highway's plays can be said to follow Euro-Canadian dramatic conventions. It is, however, spiced up with various elements associated with Native sensibility. He does not choose to express his ideas by exclusively Native or exclusively Euro-Canadian means because, on its own, neither of these possibilities would convey the diversity of his voice.

5.1 Native elements

One of the most prominent features of the plays is their rhythm. Highway's sense of time planning is surely bound up with his musicality although it can also be due to the rhythmical basis of Native culture (drumming sessions, powwow dancing etc.). The beats and pauses used in the plays are salient rhythmic signs but there is also an elaborated structure of inner pulsation in the plays.

Highway's rhythmical skills enable him to build up scenes of high excitement with great ease. Taking *The Rez Sisters* as an example, the course of time alternately speeds up

[8] Other Native Canadian playwrights write plays for smaller cast (Drew Hayden Taylor's *Someday*, for example) and some of them tend to monodramas (*Path with No Mocassins* by Shirley Cheechoo, for example). Based on Klára Kolinská, *Čekání na Kojota.*

[9] Based on Klára Kolinská, *Čekání na Kojota,* 530-560 and Jennifer Preston, "Weesageechak Begins to Dance: Native Earth Performing Art Inc." In *The Drama Review*, Vol. 36, No. 1, Spring 1992.

and slows down. Short replicas in quick succession are followed by Philomena's monologue in the first scene[10] and a similar pattern is applied throughout the play. Each act includes a scene of great turmoil and agitated tempo. In the first act, it is the moment when the women insult each other talking all at the same time.[11] In Act II, there is a number of similar scenes. With accelerating tempo, one depicts the women engaged in various economic activities[12] and another one is the bingo game[13] in the latter part of the play. All of them are succeeded by private and rather calm conversations (Zhaboonigan talking to Nanabush, women's confessions in the car, Marie-Adele succumbing to Nanabush). Highway raises and moderates the tensions in the course of the play and prepares the audience for the final dramatic climax involving the excitement of the bingo game followed by a death. He manages to keep the audience entertained and expectant for the whole length of the performance. The impact of the last scene of the play, which comes back to the setting of the very first one, is compounded by the incessant flow of excessive and introvert emotions. Nanabush dancing to the rhythm of Pelajia's hammering leaves the audience with a sense of reconciliation and tranquility.

Rhythm lies also at the root of another element significant in Highway's plays – dance. Although it is rarely the central activity on the stage, the audience is bound to notice it in each of the plays. The role of dance is also prominent in the novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen* because it is a means of emotional release for Gabriel, just as music is for Jeremiah. There, however, it is used as a literary theme, bearing slightly different meanings than dance on stage. In traditional Native art, dance is a key element of artistic expression. It stresses the non-written and rather performative nature of Native art. Nevertheless, Highway understood that this sense of motion does not clash with the Euro-Canadian emphasis on words, of language prior to gesture. On the contrary, together they create an interesting show.

Therefore, dance in the plays illustrates the meaning deplored by the words spoken, or, if the power of words is semantically insufficient, the dance takes over the role of the messenger. In the play *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout,* Act I opens with Annabelle and Isabel going to Delilah's house and as their discussion slowly turns to an argument, their

[10] The play is not explicitly divided into scenes but they can be easily traced according to the changing of characters and places. The first scene relates to pages 2-18 in the published script. Highway, *The Rez Sisters.*

[11] Highway, *The Rez Sisters*, 44–46.

[12] Highway, *The Rez Sisters*, 70–74.

[13] Highway, *The Rez Sisters*, 100–103.

walking turns to "a syncopated dance, a fractured tango."[14] Though the characters do not actually dance the tango, the fact that Highway uses just this dance as a comparison for the emotion expressed elucidates his artistic style. Unconcerned with the actual Native dancing, Highway rather works with dance as a universal expressive medium. He freely borrows artistic devices from other cultures, if they express the emotion that he wants to convey more accurately.

In *The Rez Sisters*, dance replaces words in the climax of the play when Nanabush leads Marie-Adele to the spirit world. The stage instructions describe the scene in this way: "Bingo cards are flying like confetti. Total madness and mayhem. The music is going crazy. And out of this chaos emerges the calm, silent image of Marie-Adele waltzing romantically in the arms of the Bingo Master."[15] Once again, there is a European dance, waltz this time, as the motional element. The fact that it is Nanabush who is dancing a non-Native dance might seemingly contradict the idea of Highway's use of dance as a Native artistic device. However, it is more important to notice that he chooses to express the emotion through dance rather than through words which is an idea coming from his Native experience. Even though he finds an appropriate dance in European culture for this scene, it is his Native sensibility which defines the image of the scene. In addition, Highway's image of the trickster does not consist of exclusively Native elements, as was discussed in the previous chapter.

Another feature of Highway's plays which undoubtedly captures the reader's or audience's attention is the use of magic and illusion. In three of his plays[16], the stage is divided into the space for people and the space for the spirits, i. e. Nanabush. This division alone suggests the importance of magic in the performances. There are also many moments at which illusion replaces real things or actions. In *Rose*, for example, all the motorcycle riding is not real but pretended.[17] In *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout*, the final banquet is in fact an illusory combination of funeral and banquet, the central prop being Delilah's veil representing a tablecloth, a wedding veil and a river at the same time.[18] Another magic device is the jukebox which is used in *The Rez Sisters, Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* and

[14] Highway, *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout*, 18.
[15] Highway, *The Rez Sisters*, 103.
[16] The plays *The Rez Sisters, Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* and *Rose* are meant.
[17] Highway explains this very urgently in the production notes for the play. Directors and producers declined to stage the show because of the props demanded, but Highway makes it clear he did not mean it literally. The misunderstanding around this play also illustrates the cultural difference. Highway had to explain the use of illusion to the others because otherwise they would not use it at all. In Highway, *Rose*, 8–9.
[18] Based on instructions in Highway, *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout*, 87.

Rose. As a result, the audience is asked to use their own imagination to translate the scene. Highway seems to depend on illusion very often. It is not, however, caused by lack of dramatic plan, but rather yet another expression of Native sensibility.

Highway points out the vitality of Native spirituality by intertwining the human and the divine on stage. He wants to demonstrate that rather than being a closed realm, the Native spirit world often overlaps with our world and sometimes one cannot tell magic from reality. He explains that in the interview with Hartmut Lutz:

> It's [Native mythology] still very much alive in our spirits, although it's not an intellectual thing necessarily. But the spirit is still infused with it – our people. And the vitality, and the relevancy of it, and the immediacy of it are very much with us. … There is a spirituality that still is so powerful and beautiful and passionate![19]

Native spirituality is vital and people live it all the time. Christianity, on the contrary, is a mythology reserved "for Sundays, for museums or for death."[20] Native people did not limit their spiritual world to churches nor did they not set special time for worshipping. Their mythology pervades all their life and activities, art included. Highway highlights this by displaying simultaneously both worlds.

Despite all the engaging features of the plays discussed previously, humour is the quality that the audience value probably the most. The comic effects are created by the use of language, by paradoxical situations and occasionally also by exposing cultural differences. The humour frequently concerns human physical needs. Philomena and her interest in toilets is a source of humour throughout *The Rez Sisters*, for example. Various sexual allusions are made in all of the plays.[21] The need to laugh is connected with the character or trickster. The trickster, the clown, teaches us to perceive the world as a celebration, suggesting that people should be laughing whenever they have the chance. This need is expressed by Chief Big Rose in the play *Rose* and her intention to build an entertaining parallel to solarium, a hilarium. She signs:

> You see, my dears, as Chief of the People,
> The way I see it is this:
> The world takes itself too seriously,
> Too seriously, way too serious;

[19] Hartmut Lutz, *Contemporary Challenges*, 90-91.
[20] Lutz and Highway in Hartmut Lutz, *Contemporary Challenges*, 91.
[21] Isabel shows Delilah how to sew more quickly, for example, and says: "Thrust. Twitch. Thrust. Twitch. (…) Faster! Harder! Deeper!" in Highway, *Ernestine*, 30.

Biz-ness, for instance, the world of politics,
Law, religion, you name it, it's always
Men who run these things ain't that too bad?[22]

Humour has vanished from the world on account of all the big, serious issues. Lack of laughter is unmistakably connected with Christianity which is not basically a comic religion, as discussed in the previous chapter. Highway therefore promotes the trickster who makes people laugh and stresses the comic view on life.

Humour, however, functions not only as entertainment but also as healing. As said in the interview with Tomson Highway in CBC television, "against windigo, there is trickster, laughing."[23] Native experience of cultural clash, oppression and abuse would not be sufferable if there was not humour. Similarly, the themes depicted in Highway's plays are in fact very dark and gloomy. He, however, manages to beat the disastrous feeling by humour so that the audience go home elated, not depressed. This corresponds with the trickster's perception of the world as a primarily joyful place. Rubelise da Cunha observes that "in Highway's works, ludic play survives through the triumph of the trickster, a figure that is able to balance the pain of colonialism with humour."[24] The windigo, represented by cultural antagonism, is beaten by trickster.

Though discussing the plays, there is a significant passage dealing with humour in the novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen.* It is the story of the trickster coming down to the earth in the form of a weasel to kill the windigo. He enters the beast's inside and devours its entrails to kill it. However, when coming out of the beast's backside, his new white coat gets dirty with shit.[25] Rubelise da Cunha is undoubtedly right to read the story as a "fight against the evil colonial forces [the church and capitalism] that devour the soul of the Cree boys."[26] Nevertheless, the fight is essentially comic. The story is not about a heroic battle of two mythological characters, it is about a trickster's trick which may have been successful but for the dirty coat. It is a typical ending of a trickster's activity – he meant well but something went wrong. The humour of the story distances the horror associated with the windigo so that people are amused rather than frightened. This is the trickster's victory. The same strategy is

[22] Highway, *Rose*, 64.
[23] Duncan McKeough, "The Story Teller: An Interview with Tomson Highway," *The National Magazine*, CBC Television. Toronto: Southam Inc, 24 June 1999.
[24] Rubelise da Cunha, "The Trickster Wink: Storytelling and Resistance in Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*," *Ilha do Desterro*, No. 56, 94.
[25] Based on Highway, *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, 118-120.
[26] Rubelise da Cunha, The Trickster Wink, 108.

employed in Highway's plays – they deal with the horrors of life but show people overcoming their fear and depression by laughter.

5.2 Juxtaposition as a representation of cultural clash

Many elements in Highway's plays might be classified as juxtaposed. Motifs from Native mythology and Christianity are put side by side, the reservation setting is filled with jukeboxes and posters of Marilyn Monroe. The audience tends to be slightly confused by the discrepancy of these things because it shatters the stereotypical vision of Native life and life in a reservation. Highway intentionally lines his depiction of the rez with some iconic features of Euro-Canadian culture in order to question the audience's expectations. Moreover, confusion is exactly the feeling resulting from a cultural clash and Highway deliberately faces the audience with this kind of experience.

Juxtaposition is not only utilized in the setting and props but it is also applied in dialogues. In such dialogues, important social problems are mixed with ordinary trivialities. Although the characters involved are together on the stage exchanging lines, they are not really communicating with each other. An example from *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* follows, in which Simon discusses the need to search for tradition and Zachary fantasizes about his bakery:

> SIMON: …something has to be done…
> ZACHARY: …strawberry pies…
> SIMON: …in this dream…
> ZACHARY: …so fresh and flakey they fairly bubble over with the cream from the very breast of Mother Nature herself…
> SIMON: …the drum has to come back, mistigwuskeek..
> ZACHARY: …bran muffins, cherry tarts…
> SIMON: …the medicine, the power, this…
> *Holding the bustle up in the air.*
> ZACHARY: … butter tarts…[27]

Though speaking about very different things, Highway constructs the dialogue as seemingly functional. When Simon talks about necessity to do something with the lost traditions, Zachary answers by grammatically corresponding reply but totally out of context. This inability to communicate expresses the incongruence of attitudes in Native community, the loss of common vision of their culture. Each of them minds his own problem without

[27] Highway, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, 43.

listening to the other one. The ironical juxtaposition of searching for traditions and pondering on various kinds of baking products highlights the confusion of Native community. The attempts to restore the roots do not incite any proper response or interest. Focus on pop culture represented by Zachary and his tarts here is ridiculed and trivialized in the correlation with Simon's problem but on the other hand, Simon's big talk comes out as too serious, stiff and reserved in comparison to the speech of his companion. The aims of both of them are devaluated in the juxtaposition.

A similar moment comes when the men are talking about the cause of Dickie Bird's disability. They discuss the horrible circumstances in which he was born and they end up arguing. In the last moment of the scene, Zachary comes holding his pie, saying: "It worked!"[28] Again, the lack of common feeling is exposed.

The juxtaposition is driven to extremities in this play. Highway uncompromisingly mixes the tragic with the comic as the tragedies of the plot multiply. After the first tragic event, the rape of Patsy, Big Joey takes Dickie Bird to his lodge and the younger man attempt to shoot himself by Joey's gun. This tense moment is interrupted by Nanabush. "Split seconds before complete black-out, Marilyn Monroe farts, courtesy of Ms. Nanabush: a little flag reading 'poot' pops out of Ms. Monroe's derriere, as on play gun. We hear a cute little 'poot' sound."[29] Similarly, after Simon's tragic death and Zachary's desperate call for God's help, Nanabush appears sitting on a toilet "having a good shit" and "nonchalantly filing his/her fingernails."[30] The clash of the tragic and the comic is immense in these moments. The shift between the insecurity of one's existence at one moment and Nanabush performing the most primitive human need is very quick, unprepared and so shocking. The laughter does not come naturally because the audience/reader is stunned and not expecting this kind of ending for such a scene. The humour which comes surprisingly from tragedy intensifies the sense of discrepancy and perversion of whole situation and of the events happening in the reservation. The trickster, however, comes as a victor even from such collisions. Nanabush survives the cultural clash depicted in *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. As well as in the weasel's story, the trickster wins over the monster although coming out of it a bit dirty. It is humour which enables him to survive and which enable the people, in the rez and in the theatre as well, to beat the tragedy.

[28] Highway, *Dry Lips*, 95.
[29] Highway, *Dry Lips*, 107.
[30] Highway, *Dry Lips*, 117.

The use of juxtaposition in Highway's plays represents the clash of cultures in the reservations. Despite the tragic events resulting from the collision, the juxtaposed elements are frequently comic and provoke laughter. In this way, the use of juxtaposition both exposes and reconciles the cultural clash.

5.3 The element of game and show

The idea of play and show is not only present in Highway's literary work. His cabarets and musical shows are based on this principle as well. That will be discussed in the next chapter.

The celebratory and playful nature of his artistic voice is related to Native mythology and the character of the trickster. The image of the universe as a "rampant celebration"[31] intrinsic to the Native perception of the world is reflected in his plays. The idea is deftly expressed in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* by the fox trickster who explains to Jeremiah that "without entertainment, honeypot, without distraction, without dreams, life's a drag."[32] The need to laugh and stress the good moments of life is essential for surviving, especially in such environment as north Canada. And it cannot be anybody else than the trickster, the clown who puts on this show. And yet of course, the trickster is not only entertaining, but also mischievous, and there are not only roses but also thorns in the world. There is nothing one can do about it so as the fox suggests, one can either go round complaining and feeling sorry for himself or get over it and have fun.[33]

Highway uses the motif of play or game to promote the same idea in his work. There is usually some kind of play or show in his work, frequently taking on the role of climax. In *The Rez Sisters*, for example, there is the bingo in Act II, the big show the women long for from the beginning of the play with the trickster as the bingo master. It also includes the moment of death however. The lesson that the trickster teaches them is just about the necessity to search for the good moments in life, as discussed in the previous chapter.

The game that Highway uses in this play is the bingo. This is of course a Euro-Canadian popular game with no relevance to Native traditions. Similarly to the element of dance, however, it is not the form that he is concerned about but the principle of game as

[31] Highway uses this phrase in his lecture on mythologies in which he explains Native perception of existence as circular, "one endless circle of birth and death," which should be celebrated. In Highway, *Comparing Mythologies,* 44.
[32] Highway, *Kiss,* 233.
[33] Based on Highway, *Kiss*, 233.

such. Highway again combines one of the essential notions of Native culture with elements from Euro-Canadian background. They match neatly because Euro-Canadian art is naturally also based on the idea of entertainment. In *The Rez Sisters*, Highway stresses this by including the climactic game of bingo in the development of the play. The audience is really supposed to play bingo according to stage instructions: "The audience plays bingo, with the seven women, who have moved slowly into the audience during the Bingo Master's speech, playing along. Until somebody in the audience shouts, 'Bingo'!"[34] Highway makes the audience to participate in the show, he makes them follow the instructions of the bingo master. In the deeper meaning of the scene, he makes them participate in the image of the world as a show. Highway succeeds in joining the pretended show with the show performed on stage and unite the make-belief participants of the bingo with the real people in the theatre. This unification highlights the message of the following Pelajia's speech[35] because the bingo and the big jackpot that she is talking about is now common experience of the women on stage and the audience watching them. Using the game enables Highway to communicate his message to the people in a very direct and, more importantly, a highly entertaining way.

Play and show is present in other Highway's works. There is the hockey match staged in *Dry Lips* and *Rose* is full of musical show both as a theme and an actual performance. The banquet in *Ernestine Shuswap* is structured as a climax scene as well (although it is not a climax in the proper sense of European drama, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter). Highway's interest in this motive is evident and all the examples mentioned stand also for the combination of the Native notion of play and Euro-Canadian show-business themes (banquets, hockey matches and musicals all come from the western culture).

The concept of play and show as a meeting point of both Native and Euro-Canadian art is expressed also in *Dry Lips*. The penultimate scene depicting the hockey match is described in the following way:

> Dickie Bird begins chanting and stomping his foot in time to Creature's and Spooky's cheers. Bits and pieces of Nanabush/Gazelle Nataways' 'strip music' and Kitty Wells' 'It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels' begin to weave in and out of this 'sound collage', a collage which now has a definite 'pounding' rhythm to it. Over it all soars the sound of Zachary's

[34] Highway, *The Rez Sisters*, 101.

[35] She speaks about the necessity to "make most of it [life] while we're here," about the nature of life which brings both good and bad times. In Highway, *The Rez Sisters*, 105.

> harmonica, swooping and diving brilliantly, recalling many of Nanabush's appearances throughout the play.[36]

The cultural collage indicated by the instructions, in which men's hockey chanting meets with country songs, together producing a "pounding" rhythm, brings powwow drumming to mind. This multicultural hockey arena represents the arena of the world in which all the cultures meet. The playground is a meeting point of cultures developed for the single purpose of entertainment and fun. The trickster is not missing, of course; his song rises above all the other voices. The hockey game enables Highway to represent the world as a show full of miscellaneous elements but with a common goal.

Highway's plays are rich in artistic devices. The elements he uses to achieve his dramatic intentions, the elements of dance, rhythm, illusion, play and humour, derive from his Native sensibility. All of these features are intrinsic to Native culture and are still alive today. Nevertheless, these elements are not necessarily expressed in a traditional Native form. Highway does not use traditional dance nor traditional drumming. The Native part of his artistic voice can be traced mainly in the need to express his ideas with the help of rhythm, dance, illusion etc. The elements discussed often take form coming from Euro-Canadian culture and the genre, the complex in which they are used, is of this culture as well. In other words, Highway speaks with Native sensibility through Euro-Canadian artistic forms. He takes a western canonical, time-proven genre and enriches it with elements of his Native experience. The result is captivating, startling and above all amusing. What he offers to the audience is 'the best of both worlds' and they like it.

The search for artistic voice was long and hard for Highway but the fight appears to have been fruitful in the end. His education, though connected with emotional deprivation and confusion of values, equipped him with artistic tools and, in the course of time, he learnt how to use them. The characters of Jeremiah and Gabriel undergo a similar struggle. Highway relates their journey in search of an artistic voice to the traditional Native story of the Son of Ayash, which is narrated to them by their dying father.[37]

The original story has many versions, which is not unusual for stories of oral tradition, but the invariable plot introduces a young man deserted on an island looking for his

[36] Highway, *Dry Lips*, 125.
[37] Highway, *Kiss*, 227-228.

mother. He obtains several magic weapons for his deeds on the island and, finally, he manages to find his mother. In the end, the Son of Ayash destroys the world because it became too evil and causes it to be created anew by the Great Spirit.[38]

The Okimasis brothers, and Highway as well, were left on an island, too, and they have had to fight to find their way back to their emotional homeland. There were many dangers awaiting them in the residential school and in the town where they studied later on but, on the other hand, they gained artistic skills there. Having been influenced by the white society, they had to search for their Native identity and had to reconcile their origin with their education. Their journey was successful, and so was Highway's. Highway has come to terms with the variety of cultural elements that constitute his knowledge and sensibility. Consequently, he does not perceive the experience of residential school as primarily negative.[39] He appreciates the possibilities that it offered to him because without the skills that he learnt there he would never have become a playwright, novelist, pianist and composer. With these skills, with these magical weapons, he is able to tell his stories and express his ideas about the world. His work envisages the new world, the world of cultural diversity and tolerance.

[38] The paraphrase is based on one of the versions of the story given in Robert Brightman, *Traditional Narratives of the Rock Cree Indians* (Regina: University of Regina, 1989), 88–93.

[39] Highway talks about the residential school being in fact positive and wonderful experience in the interview with Ken Rockburn, in *Rockburn Presents – Tomson Highway*, CPAC, prod. Ken Rockburn, Ottawa, Canada. 6 Oct 2010 26-28 min.

6 Music

As a musician, Tomson Highway has undergone considerable development in his lifetime. Similarly to his literary career, he was educated according to Euro-Canadian standards, studying piano at various universities and graduating as a classical pianist in 1975.[1] However, the form of music that he has been using in his works is not based on classical music only. Having realized that there was little space for Chopin in the rez, he has had to search for a more suitable artistic voice. In his plays and shows, he presents music in various ways that make its overall significance in his work undeniable.

See appendix 4 for pictures of Tomson Highway playing the piano, p. 68.

6.1 Music as a theme

Highway expresses his approach to music in his literary works, especially in the novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. In this novel, the role of music is bound up with the character of Jeremiah through whom Highway reflects many of his own ideas. Although it must be remembered that the novel is a piece of fiction that employs music as a literary motif, Highway's treatment of it neatly corresponds with the development of his own musical voice.

In the first place, music offers Jeremiah an escape from his loneliness in the city. Interestingly, it makes him capable of travelling home in his mind. The piano is "his only friend in the metropolis of half a million souls"[2] and it is his mental connection with the people he loves. He plays and his mind travels to his homeland: "The rhythmic underpinning of the piece brought to Jeremiah's mind Saturday nights in Eemanapiteepitat during those too-brief summer months when he and his siblings had been set free from residential school."[3] Even though Bach's *Toccata* has little in common with northern Manitoba, the abstractness of music enables him to give free rein to his emotions. There is nobody in the town with whom he could share his emotions and experience. He is the only Native child in the school, and classical music serves him as a means to unburden his troubled mind and to get in virtual touch with his family. Highway uses harmony as a comparison for the coming-home quality of music. Jeremiah played and struggled his way through

[1] For more details see Introduction.
[2] Highway, *Kiss*, 100.
[3] Highway, *Kiss*, 100.

Toccata and finally, Highway writes, he "slid into the coda – the largo, a hymn to the heavens – and thereby came back home to the tonic."[4] The harmonic plan of the piece is a metaphor of Jeremiah's journey back home. The tonal harmony based on one home key, with various excursions to other keys and final destination again on the tonic, is used as an image of Jeremiah's travel from his homeland to the city and via music home again.[5]

Nevertheless, music gradually changes into an ambition to assimilate and achieve success in the urban white society. His struggle to camouflage by means of his playing estranges him from his origins and he starts losing his original identity. However, he only realizes this at a piano competition which he paradoxically wins. Krotz says that "instead of enabling him to rise above its grim realities, classical music has only led him deeper into a territory in which he remains 'infuriatingly alone'."[6] The attitude of the committee towards him, described in the chapter Characters, makes him realize that classical music cannot help him to reconcile his Native identity and Euro-Canadian education and not knowing what to do, he stops playing it altogether for many years.

Fortunately, the trickster comes and together with Gabriel they persuade Jeremiah to play the piano again. Enough time has passed now and he is able to get over his disappointment, once again trusting music to express his emotions. The healing and reconciliatory power of music is renewed:

> First came his left hand, pounding on its own a steel-hard unforgiving four-four time, each beat seamlessly connected by triplet sixteenth notes, an accidental toccata. From where? "Ha!" Before he knew it, his other hand had joined, its discords like random gunshots: bang, bang! (…)
>
> Like a thunderclap, silence struck. Jeremiah leapt from his bench, and with a beaded drumstick pounded at the bass strings of the instrument. (…) And, suddenly, the piano was a powwow drum propelling a Cree Round Dance with the clangour and dissonance of the twentieth century.[7]

Jeremiah is now capable of perceiving music in its proper sense without identifying it with his fears or hopes. He liberates his emotions and projects them in the melody he produces. He has finally found his voice, the voice in which he can unite his classical piano skills with his

[4] Highway, *Kiss*, 101.

[5] The notion of harmony and music as a territory is in more details observed in Sarah Wylie Krotz's paper "Productive Dissonance: Classical Music in Tomson Highway's Kiss of the Fur Queen," *Studies in Canadian Literature* Vol. 34, No. 1, 2009.

[6] Sarah Wylie Krotz, Productive Dissonance, 194.

[7] Highway, *Kiss*, 265–267.

Native sensibility. The instrument and the playing technique he uses might be Euro-Canadian but it does not prevent him from showing his emotions influenced by a different mythological realm. Both Jeremiah and his music have been freed of the burden of the cultural clash and he has found out that just as music once made him voiceless, it now helps him to speak out his experience. Krotz observes:

> So begins the collaborative process through which Jeremiah comes into his own as an artist – not, importantly, as a performer singularly fettered to classical music, as he was earlier in the novel, but as a composer, playwright, and creator in his own right whose art reflects the heterogeneity and conflict of the society in which he lives.[8]

No longer restricted by his mimicry and classical music, he opens up his art for both of the cultures that he has come across. His art becomes as rich, ambiguous and diverse as the elements of his life and self are. The same diversity is a prominent feature of Tomson Highway's life and expressive voice.

In the play *Ernestine Shuswap*, music is presented as both a consolatory and disruptive element. There, however, it rather has an illustrative function. Right from the beginning of the play, it highlights the juxtaposition of comedy and tragedy, anticipating the forth-coming clash of cultures. Highway describes the opening scene in the following way:

> First, from the darkness, the gurgle of a river – rich, evocative, the voice of a land. It rises, fades. Out of it "bleeds" a very low note, on a cello, bowed. And sustained, all the way through the opening trio of monologues, with sporadic, jarring little "grace notes," changes of key, that sort of thing, the whole point being: though the monologues are comic more than anything, what has to be established, right off the top, is, a) an atmosphere of ominous foreboding and, b) the counterpoint of comedy and tragedy.[9]

The sound of a river stream which opens the play is immediately followed by a cello sound. The succession of the sound relating, at least stereotypically, to the rez and that of a string instrument evocative of Euro-Canadian culture is significant. The mixture and clash suggested by this opening scene is sustained throughout the play. Cello music, individual parts from Bach's *Suites for Cello Solo* to be precise, accompanies all the scenes in which Delilah Rose appears. At the moment the audience learn she is married to a white cowboy, the reason why

[8] Krotz, Productive Dissonance, 198.
[9] Highway, *Ernestine*, 13.

Bach forms the musical background of her scenes is disclosed as well. Speaking about falling in love with the cowboy because of his otherness, she says:

> Because he was different, because he was special, because he liked … classical music, yes, that's what he called this curious music I still don't understand. (…) Said he had a cousin away over in England who played this thing called a cello. Somehow, says Billy Boy to me, that music - that's the only thing that could assuage the pain, the unbearable pain of feeling … out of place, of not belonging.[10]

Bach's music represents European culture, her husband's culture. She listens to it because it reminds her of him. For him it is also, as she says, a source of consolation and a reminder of his homeland. Despite being described as comforting by Delilah, the cello music stresses the collision of cultures in the play. It is caused by the incongruence of the setting and music used and Highway intensifies this feeling by revealing that the cello music is actually played by a cowboy, who appears just after the quoted paragraph.[11] Again, it is immensely comic but it gains gloomy undertones as Delilah's mental disturbance increases. The cello-playing cowboy is a "portent of her incipient insanity," as Highway indicates in the instructions.[12] The discrepancy between being a cowboy and playing the cello stands for the cultural collision she is faced with. Klára Kolinská points out: "Classical music in the play serves the function of the subject matter itself, defamiliarized by being placed out of any expected context, at the disposal of four Aboriginal women in an outlying community of Thompson River."[13] The defamiliarization and displacement of the classical music corresponds with the displacement of the character of Delilah who is left alone in between her Native community and the white society.

Nevertheless, Highway does not allow the audience to go home with the feeling that classical music is out of place and conflictive. The play ends by Beethoven's *Sonata for Cello and Piano in A-major* resonating in the theatre and evoking a river, "a river flowing smooth, majestic, dignified, and powerful."[14] The classical music is therefore reconciled with the setting, expressing not the imposed white community but the element associated

[10] Highway, *Ernestine*, 47.
[11] Highway, *Ernestine*, 48.
[12] Highway, *Ernestine*, 48.
[13] Klára Kolinská, "'Music Unites (First) Nations:' (Im)Possible Soundscapes in Tomson Highway's Plays *Rose* and *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout*," *Native Americans and First Nations: A Transnational Challenge*, ed. Walderman Zachariewicz (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2009), 143.
[14] Highway, *Ernestine*, 90.

from the beginning with Native community, the river. Moreover, the music in this case celebrates nature and the community as such. For the first time, we hear the cello accompanied by another instrument, a piano. Highway stresses the solo quality of cello music throughout the play, always writing the note "unaccompanied" in the instructions. The singleness of the instrument stands for the loneliness of the character of Delilah. At the end of the play, however, the sound of the cello and piano duo suggests companionship. Despite Delilah's death and loss of rights of the Thompson River community, Highway wants the audience to go home in a happy mood. The necessity of positive mind is not only his intention but also an expression of Native sensibility embodied especially in the character of the trickster.

6.2 Euro-Canadian music

Highway uses both classical and popular music of Euro-Canadian origin in his plays. For example, some of the scenes in Act I of the play *Ernestine Shuswap* are accompanied by selected parts from Bach's *Suites for Cello Solo*,[15] parts of which are also used in Rose in several places. The last scene of the same play is closed by the first movement of Beethoven's *Sonata for Cello and Piano in A-major*, op. 69.[16] In *Rose*, Highway quotes Gaetano Donizetti's aria *Spargi D'Amaro Pianto* from his opera *Lucia di Lammermoor*.[17] In terms of popular music, he often uses country songs that were in vogue in the period from the 1950's to the 1970's (e. g. Patsy Cline's *Crazy*[18] and Emmylou Harris' *Blue Kentucky Girl*[19] sung by Emily in *The Rez Sisters*, Kitty Wells' *It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels*[20] in *Dry Lips*). Apart from directly quoting the lyrics, he often makes allusions to the songs, mentioning them in a dialogue or imitating the singers' voices. *Fever* by Peggy Lee[21] or *The Ring of Fire* by Johny Cash[22] are used in this way in the plays. As well as that, he freely borrows children songs (*Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*[23] in *Rose*) or folk songs of other

[15] Highway, *Ernestine*, 25–36, 46–49, 56, 62–63.
[16] Highway, *Ernestine*, 90.
[17] Highway, *Rose*, 78.
[18] Highway, *The Rez Sisters*, 83.
[19] Highway, *The Rez Sisters*, 98.
[20] Highway, *Dry Lips*, 76–78, 92–93, 125.
[21] Highway, *Rose*, 31.
[22] Highway, *Dry Lips*, 92.
[23] Highway, *Rose*, 133.

nations (Sicilian tarantella[24] in *Rose*, for example). The appearance of Nanabush in *Dry Lips* is accompanied by harmonica player playing blues.[25] The appearance of Nanabush in *Dry Lips* is accompanied by a harmonica blues tune. The range of genres and styles of music that he employs in his work is very wide and diverse. The pieces come both from classical music, which tends to be a minority genre, and from popular mass culture.

Some of the songs are used illustratively to support the intended theatrical effect. Donizetti's aria, for example, resounds and creates a background for a scene in which two lovers, Pussy and Big Joey, discuss Italian mafia.[26] The aria is linked to the subject of the conversation, underpinning the image created on stage. Analyzed in more detail, however, it also anticipates the suffering and sense of death which results from the lovers' relationship. The aria is a good-bye song of a dying lover who hopes to see her sweetheart in heaven. The lyrics foreshadow the events in the latter part of the play when Big Joey tortures Pussy nearly to death.[27] Even though the aria is presented episodically, in one scene only, it carries an important message in the play. The question is, however, if the audience is able to recognize and understand the allusion because the aria is not one of the well-known pieces and the scene is focused mainly on the conversation. The illustrative function of the aria might therefore be prevalent. Nevertheless, the way Highway works with this piece of classical music shows that he does not use music superficially but within an elaborated dramatic plan.

Similarly, Kitty Wells' *It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels* in *Dry Lips* augurs and accompanies the unfortunate circumstances in which Dickie Bird is born. The sentimental nature of the song is juxtaposed to the tragic event which is about to happen; the triviality of the song stresses the despair of Black Lady Halked giving birth in a pub, drunk and without any help. Quotations of the song are suggested twice more in the play[28] so that the song becomes a permanent motif of tragedy and the degraded woman's strength in giving birth.

There is another interesting use of Euro-Canadian music in the play *Dry Lips*. The trickster, this time bearing by the Ojibway name Nanabush, is introduced by "harmonic playing, permeated with a definite 'blues' flavor,"[29] as Highway explains in the production

[24] Highway, *Rose*, 82.
[25] Highway, *Dry Lips*, 10.
[26] Highway, *Rose*, 78–80.
[27] Highway, *Rose*, 130.
[28] Highway, *Dry Lips*, 92–93, 125.
[29] Highway, *Dry Lips*, 10.

notes preceding the screenplay. The connection of the Native mythological character and blues music played on harmonica reflects the hybrid quality of the trickster described in the chapter Trickster. Highway deliberately associates her with non-Native music in order to emphasize that contemporary Native culture does not consist of traditional Native elements only. In addition, the blues, melancholic nature of the music once again foretokens the violence and pain that the trickster experiences in the play. However, it would be inaccurate to argue that Highway intentionally combines the Native character with Euro-Canadian music so as to highlight the discrepancy and contradictions between the cultures. Harmonica is attached to the trickster even after the attack and in the final scene when the audience hear trickster's triumphant, happy laughter. Euro-Canadian music thus remains to be her attribute and is not replaced by a Native musical expression to suggest her survival and victory. The sound-scape of the last scene includes the trickster's laughter, a baby's laughter and a "magical arpeggio on harmonica."[30] The trickster keeps her cross-cultural quality.

It is important to mention that Highway occasionally uses Native songs, too. The musical *Rose* opens by Emily chanting a healing song [31] and the women in *The Rez Sisters* sing a funeral song for Marie-Adele when she dies.[32] Euro-Canadian music is, however, undoubtedly prevalent.

The heterogeneity of the music used in the plays mirrors its various purposes. The popular songs keep the audience involved and express the mainstream features of the contemporary rez. On the other hand, the abstractness of classical music conveys general ideas, giving rise to a different kind of ambience, at times an atmosphere of discord, at other times one of affinity.

Highway frequently uses Euro-Canadian music in his literary works. Apart from enriching the plays with another medium of entertainment, he discards the stereotypical image of the Native reservation. Giving a prominent place to Euro-Canadian music, Highway challenges the image of the Native people associated exclusively with traditional music such as powwow drumming. As a literary and dramatic theme, music therefore departs from the stereotype and approximates the native culture to the white mainstream society at the same time. Furthermore, the fact that Highway mainly works with music of non-Native traditions is one of the most significant expressions of his hybrid approach to art. He

[30] Highway, *Dry Lips*, 130.
[31] Highway, *Rose*, 13.
[32] Highway, *The Rez Sisters*, 105.

deliberately chooses Euro-Canadian music and combines it with various life situations in the rez. The blending of multifarious genres, styles and cultures is all the more apparent in his own compositions.

6.3 Song as an ideal form

As has been pointed out above, it took Highway some time to discover the ideal form of his creative voice. In terms of music, it appeared to be song, musical or cabaret. These forms seem to be ideal for expressing his Native sensibility on the basis of his Euro-Canadian musical skills. He studied classical music in various institutions which provided him with skills of "melodical construction and composition abilities,"[33] he says. In other words, all Chopin's and Bach's pieces he studied gave him necessary lessons for his future compositions, although they seemed absurd in relation to his origin at the time of his studies. The discovery of the form of the song emerged from Highway's initial literary interest. He started to cooperate with his brother René, who was a dancer, and they made theatrical performances with musical and dancing interludes. He was more concerned with words at first, but gradually "music and words were getting closer and closer in the shows,"[34] says Highway, commenting on his artistic development. Words and music were eventually joined in songs. The following analysis of the songs is based on the recording titled *Patricia Cano Sings Tomson Highway: Live at the N. A. C.*[35] and on a private recording of the performance *Kisageetin – Kabaret*[36] which took place on 28th of April 2011 at Divadlo Kampa, Prague.

As a rule, Highway composes songs for a solo voice and piano. Another instrument might be involved, usually a saxophone. The form of the songs is strophic with individual stanzas followed by a chorus. There are slow, blues songs (e.g. *Jukebox Lady*) and lullabies (e.g. *When Children Sleep*) and songs of high tempo usually based on dance, syncopic rhythms such as samba (*Rio in High January*) and tango (*L'amour*) and presto tongue twisters (*Patty Cake*).

The melodies of the slow songs are intensely lyrical and yet simple, which allows the performing singer considerable freedom to decorate them with melodic tones, grace notes,

[33] *Rockburn Presents – Tomson Highway*, CPAC, prod. Ken Rockburn, Ottawa, Canada. 6 Oct 2010, 5 min 05 sec.
[34] *Rockburn Presents –Tomson Highway*, 22 min.
[35] *Tomson Highway, Patricia Cano Sings Tomson Highway: Live at the N. A. C.*, Tomson Highway, Ottawa, 2009.
[36] Tomson Highway, *Kisaggetin – Kabaret*, Divadlo Kampa, Prague, 28 Apr 2011, private recording.

and vibrato. The melodic line of the quick songs usually consists of only a few tones arrayed in harmonic sequences to create a strophe and because of the demanding tempo they are recited rather than properly sung. The compositional techniques of melodic progress largely derive from classical music. There are also only recited songs or, more precisely, stories accompanied by music (*Buenos Aires*).

The accompaniment depends on a harmonic base line in the piano left hand and chordal complements and a melodic line in the other voices. Inspiration by jazz is apparent especially as regards harmony. If there is another instrument involved, it usually doubles the base line or provides countermelodies and melodic intersections to the main melody. To better demonstrate Highway's compositional practice, three exemplary songs will be analyzed in more detail. Each song represents one type of the genres used by Highway, i. e. tongue twisters (*Patty Cake*), dance songs (*White Boys Fall in Love*) and slow ballads (*Jukebox Lady*).[37]

Patty Cake: the harmonic plan of this song is D7+ - Gmi7 – C7 – F7+. Usage of sevenths is common especially in the harmony of jazz music, which is evidently Highway's source of inspiration. On the other hand, the succession of four perfect fourths (D – G – C – F) is reminiscent of a Baroque sequence. The dramatic climaxes of the song are supported by ninth chords in the harmonic plan.

White Boys Fall in Love: apart from the seventh chords which are used in this song as well, Highway also enriches the harmony with another device of jazz music - chords with added fourths (T7+ - II+4 – D7). The song is based on swing rhythm, with harmonic countermelodies played by saxophone. The finale of the song is underscored by the concluding repetition of the refrain chromatically shifted by a semitone.

Jukebox Lady: this song follows a reversed melodic line in base which is a harmonic method used mainly in classical music (one of the best examples is *Prelude in C-major* by J. S. Bach). However, the progress of the base line is very free and unexpected as he stops the harmony on various triad inversions, six or six-four chords. The rhythm is a three-beat waltz decorated with parallel sixths movements.

The dramatic plan of the songs is simple – a short instrumental introduction, one or two stanzas, a chorus, a stanza, an instrumental break, a chorus and a chorus once again; this

[37] The songs are provided on a CD in the diploma appendix and they are extracted from the recording *Tomson Highway, Patricia Cano Sings Tomson Highway: Live at the N. A. C.*, Tomson Highway, Ottawa, 2009.

model is exemplary but there are numerous exceptions and diversions. The melodic line and instrumental accompaniment is modest and straightforward at first, but it gets more complicated and ornamented as the song progresses (as in *Somewhere a Star*, for example). In contrast, the instrumental solos are complicated, virtuosic and often improvised. As mentioned earlier in the analysis of the song *Jukebox Lady*, the final chorus and the repetition of the last stanza can be transposed in another, higher key in order to stress the majestic finale. Alternatively, the ending is climaxed by multiple repetition of the last line of the chorus.

The texts of the songs are miscellaneous. Not only are they sung in various languages – Cree, English, French, Spanish, but the themes used in them are also diverse. There are stories about love, friendship, loneliness and loss. There are also lyrical songs expressing particular emotions in a meditative, reflective way (e.g. *Somewhere a Star*) . The themes are general, dealing with essential human emotions. It cannot be said, therefore, that Highway writes Euro-Canadian music and Cree texts for his songs. There are allusions and motifs from the rez environment. Some of the songs tell a story of the Native people or are set in the rez. However, Native sensibility does not stem from the setting of the songs. Native consciousness is reflected in the way the emotions are expressed, in the way love and pain are sung in a very simple, straightforward and thus very accurate way. The emphasis on comic motifs and delightfulness of the songs promote the basic idea of the Native world as an enjoyable place.

Additionally, the genre of song is important to Highway inasmuch as it enables him to incorporate a narrative into music. As he relates, he wants to writes songs that "tell a story of life."[38] The Need and fondness of telling stories is intrinsic to Native culture. Highway continues the oral tradition of Native people by telling stories through songs. As in dramatic techniques, he chooses a Euro-Canadian form of expression but the impetus comes from his Native sensibility. Song as a way to tell a story is another example of Highway's hybrid creativity which combines Native experience with Euro-Canadian artistic forms.

The songs are integrated into cabarets and musical shows. The order of the songs is based on an essential rhythmic and expressive difference of slow and quick tempos. There is usually an opening, a welcome song (*Tansi*) and finally either a goodbye piece or a repetition of one of the songs used previously in the show. In the course of the performance, there is a strong tendency to communicate with the audience, such as singing along, dedicating a song to someone from the audience. The interactive nature of cabarets furthers the sole aim of the shows – to entertain, to keep the people in good spirits for the duration

[38] *Rockburn Presents –Tomson Highway*, 22 min.

of the performance. Entertainment is, of course, the main reason for putting on a show in any culture. Here, however, it is also connected with the Native perception of the world as a place for having a good time discussed earlier. "We're here to have one hell of the time,"[39] Highway says while talking about Native mythology and, correspondingly, Patricia Cano, the singer, introduces the cabaret by the words "Here in this cabaret, we like to laugh, we like to drink, we like to dance, we like to have a good time!"[40]. The idea of the world offered to us to enjoy is reflected in the form of the cabaret. Highway designs his shows to make people laugh, to make them rejoice in the world. In this respect, his shows represent a continuation of Native mythology and a very interactive and attractive explanation of the Native understanding of the world. Highway has found this genre to be the most relevant to his Native and Euro-Canadian experience for it combines, respectively, the sensibility of the one culture with the expressive means of the other. Together, they make up a wonderful and amusing performance.

Music occupies a prominent place in Highway's work. It appears as a literary theme in his plays and particularly in his novel. It is also presented in actual performed musical pieces. As a literary theme, it illustrates the development of his artistic voice and demonstrates the variety of the contemporary culture of the rez in which not only traditional Native music but also mainstream pop music is inherent. The diversity of existing genres enables Highway to use it as both a metaphor for the cultural clash and a means of consolatory hybridity. Moreover, the use of Euro-Canadian music de-stereotypes the rez and approximates it to mainstream urban environment in terms of music. The stereotypical image of Native people is shattered and the image of contemporary Native people, on the contrary, converges to mainstream society.

His knowledge of classical music, which at first seemed incompatible with Native environment, provided him with necessary skills in creating his own music and his own musical shows. Euro-Canadian education, Native sensibility and the artistic necessity to tell stories brought forth his own conception of song as the ideal expressive genre. He performs his songs in cabarets and musical shows, which reflects Native perception of the world as a place of entertainment and joy. In this way, he succeeded in creatively using his Native and

[39] *Tomson Highway on Women and Mythology*, IdeaCity, prod. Moses Znaimer, 2005, 5 min 47 sec.
[40] *Tomson Highway, Patricia Cano Sings Tomson Highway: Live at the N. A. C.*, Tomson Highway, Ottawa, 2009, Tansi, 1 min 14 sec.

Euro-Canadian experience and even benefiting from their differences and contradictions. He proves the productivity of multiculturalism and creates a new, hybrid genre, the Cree cabaret.

7 Conclusion

If you were asked what Chopin and reservation have in common, you would probably think that somebody is pulling your leg. This paper showed the riddle can be answered easily by one name – Tomson Highway. Life and work of this Native Canadian author has been full of similar crazy encounters with cultural differences. Having been able to reconcile all of them and transform his variegated experience into a source of creativity, he shows that the idea of multiculturalism and hybridity is healthy and productive.

Contradictions between the two cultures that Highway focuses on, Euro-Canadian and Native cultures, are not overcome easily. He describes the process of searching for one's place, an identity crisis and cultural clash in his work. The troubles caused by the cultural differences are reflected in the description of characters and in their stories. Highway depicts people clinging to mimicry or tradition as their personal solution of the identity crisis and he shows the pitfalls of such behaviour. Highway suggests another way of coming to terms with the conflicts that his people must face, the way of cultural diversity.

He takes one of the essential Native mythological characters, the trickster, and explains that his ever-changing, protean quality and his fondness of humour should serve as an example. He deliberately puts him/her through the most disturbing experience of cultural clash in order to show the necessity of considering and involving all the features of contemporary Native life. The trickster in his work is based on the traditional image but he/she takes on many non-Native features which ensures him/her survival in the modern rez, enabling people to identify with him/her. In addition, the contradictory forms that he/she assumes are source of sparkling humour.

The dramatic techniques and musical composition are based on the idea of blending and mixture as well. After some years of searching for his creative voice, Highway discovered combining his Euro-Canadian education and Native sensibility to be the right style of his work. He writes according to the Euro-Canadian dramatic tradition, enriching it with some exclusively Native features, and thus he creates some very special and unconventional pieces. His plays are extraordinary by their rhythm, use of dance and illusion and great amount of humour. The concept of play and show, with which he also often works, is closely related to the character of trickster and to the Native perception of the world as a place for celebration. On the other hand, Highway also depicts the cultural clash by the use

of juxtaposition among his prominent dramatic techniques. The expressions of Native culture are, however, organized and arranged into a form governed by Euro-Canadian standards.

The music Highway uses in his plays and composes for his cabarets is based on white culture as well. He frequently quotes canonical pieces of classical music and songs from mainstream pop music. His own musical work, for which he found the form of a strophic song the most suitable, is structured according to harmonic, rhythmic and melodic devices coming from Euro-Canadian tradition. On the other hand, the fascinating simplicity and straightforwardness with which he works with the motives and stories of the songs can be seen as an expression of Native sensibility. Nevertheless, he does not deal only with themes from the rez. The stories that he tells in his songs are international, cross-cultural and general, which speaks for the diversity that he proclaims in all his work. The concept of show pervades not only his literary but also his musical production. The cabarets and musical shows, phenomenal in their sustainably celebratory and joyful atmosphere, function as miniatures of the Native vision of the world with the laughing trickster at the centre.

Tomson Highway's work shows that art is a perfect place for cultural meetings. He manages to combine various cultural motifs and themes and unite them in unique productions. He promotes the idea of hybridity and multiculturalism not only by the choice of themes but also by the way he works with them. The artistic skills which he obtained due to Euro-Canadian education are used for expressing the Native perception of the world. Highway's approach to art enables him to reconcile his diverse experience with his origin and at the same time it enriches Canadian and world art with another sensibility. Improbable and nonsensical as it might seem, he managed to put Chopin and the rez together, with a smile to boot.

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9 List of appendices

1. Portrait of Tomson Highway (1980s)
2. Map of Maria Lake in Ontario, Canada
3. Pictures from two performances of *The Rez Sisters*
4. Tomson Highway playing the piano
5. CD with the songs *Patty Cake* (Track 1), *White Boys Fall in Love* (Track 2), *Jukebox Lady* (Track 3)

10 Appendices

App. 1: Tomson Highway in 1980s.

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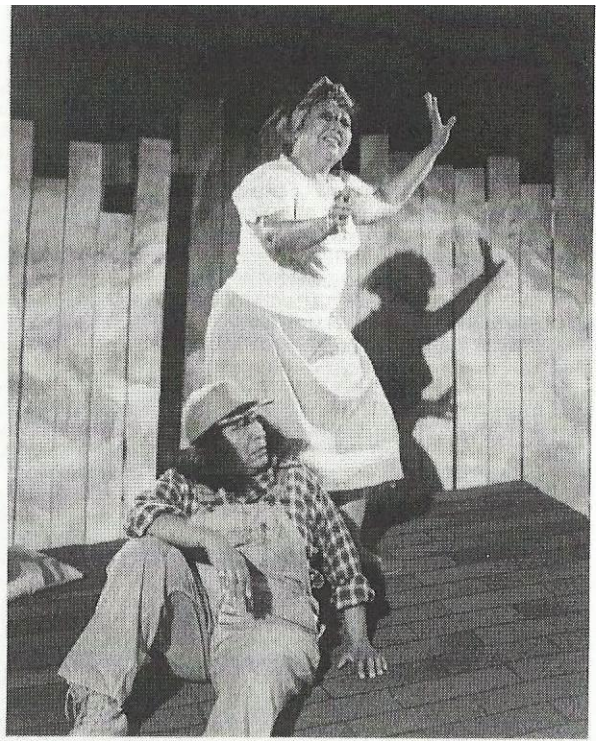
App. 2: Maria Lake in Ontario, Canada.

Google Maps. 15 July 2012

<https://maps.google.cz/maps?hl=cs&q=manitou+island+transit&ie=UTF-8>



App. 3: *The Rez Sisters* in 1986, Native Canadian Centre, Toronto and in 2011 in The Factory Theatre, Toronto.

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App. 4: Tomson Highway playing the piano.

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